My Instant Death Ability is So Overpowered, No One in This Other World Stands a Chance Against Me!

Author:
Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

Illustrator:
Chisato Naruse

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Illustration: Chuato Narese

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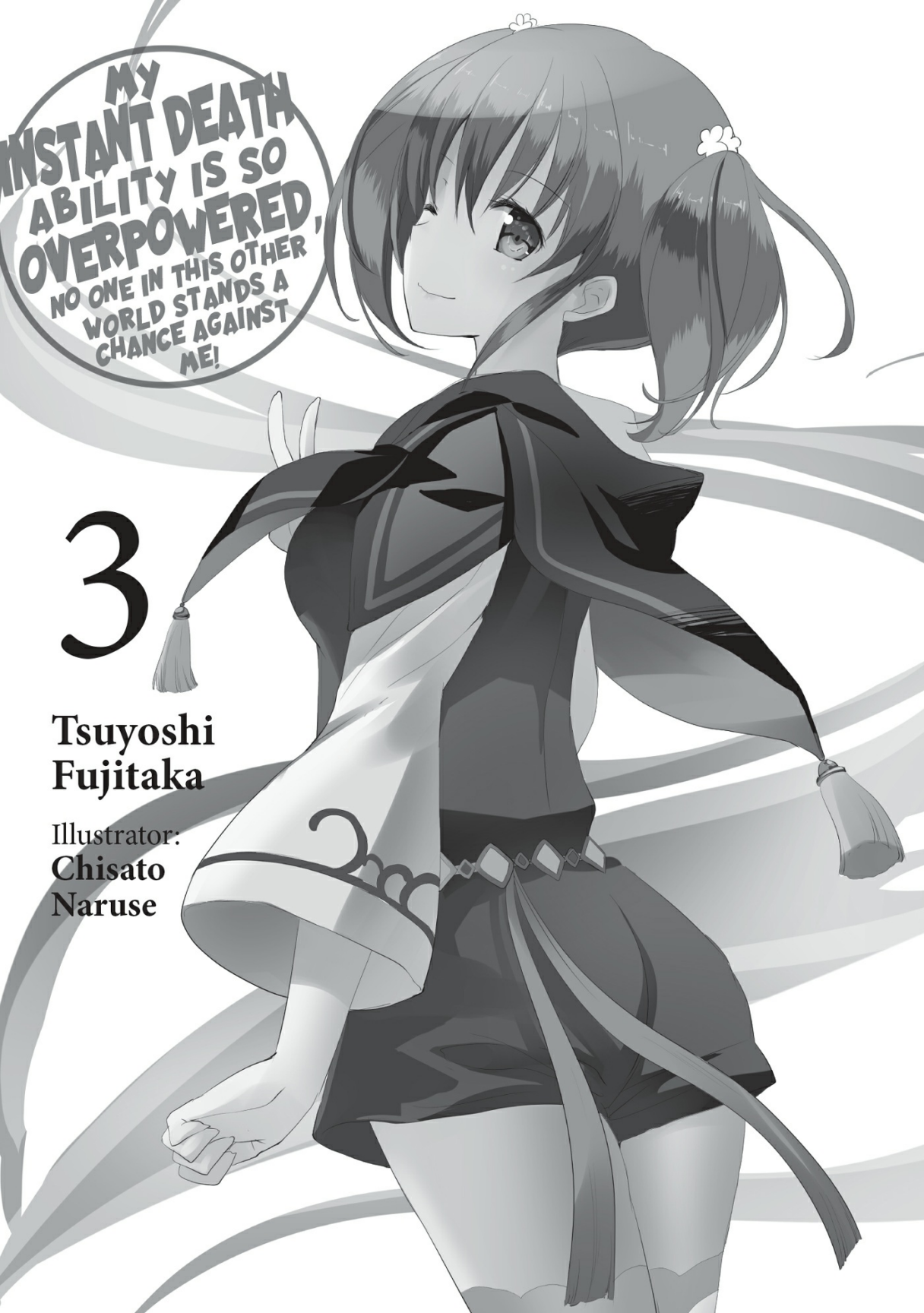
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Tsuyoshi Fujitaka
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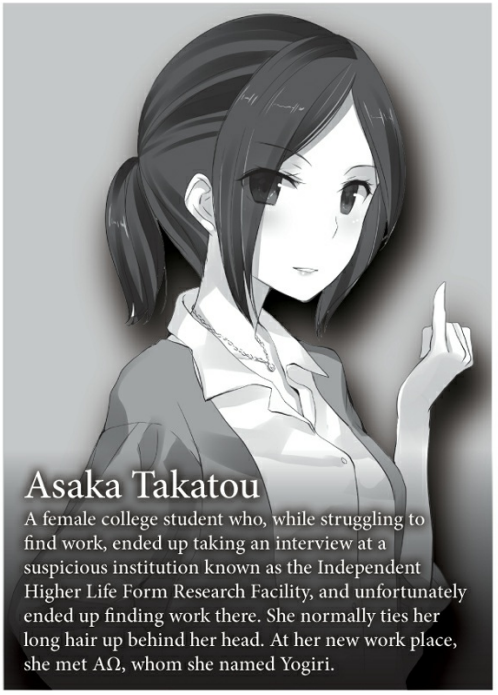
CHARACTERS

Tomochika Dannoura

High School Year 2. Although she looks quite attractive and has quite the ample chest, her role is unfortunately that of the Straight Man. Like Yogiri, she did not receive the power of the Gift, but she is trained in a martial art derived from the ancient Dannoura style of archery.

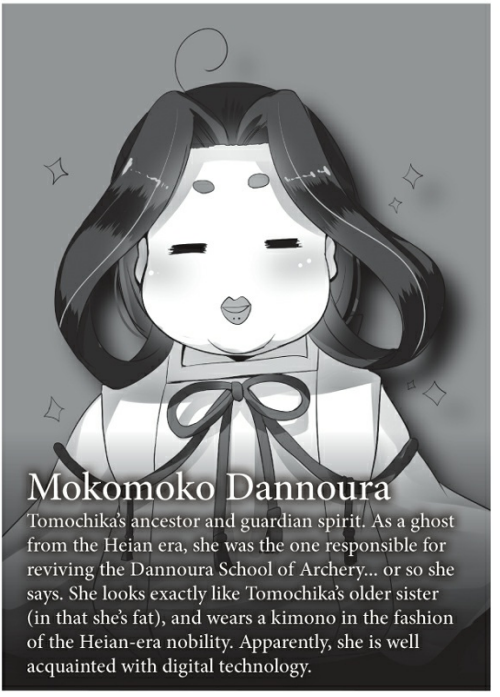
Yogiri Takatou

High School Year 2. Although he seemed unmotivated and was always sleeping in school, when he gets serious, he is surprisingly attractive. He didn't receive the Gift, the special power of this world, but he already had the power of Instant Death from his original world. Also known as AΩ.



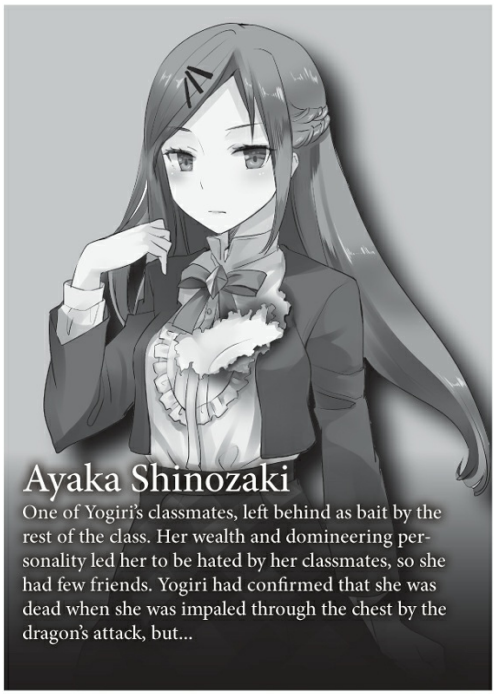
Asaka Takatou

A female college student who, while struggling to find work, ended up taking an interview at a suspicious institution known as the Independent Higher Life Form Research Facility, and unfortunately ended up finding work there. She normally ties her long hair up behind her head. At her new work place, she met AΩ, whom she named Yogiri.



Mokomoko Dannoura

Tomochika's ancestor and guardian spirit. As a ghost from the Heian era, she was the one responsible for reviving the Dannoura School of Archery... or so she says. She looks exactly like Tomochika's older sister (in that she's fat), and wears a kimono in the fashion of the Heian-era nobility. Apparently, she is well acquainted with digital technology.

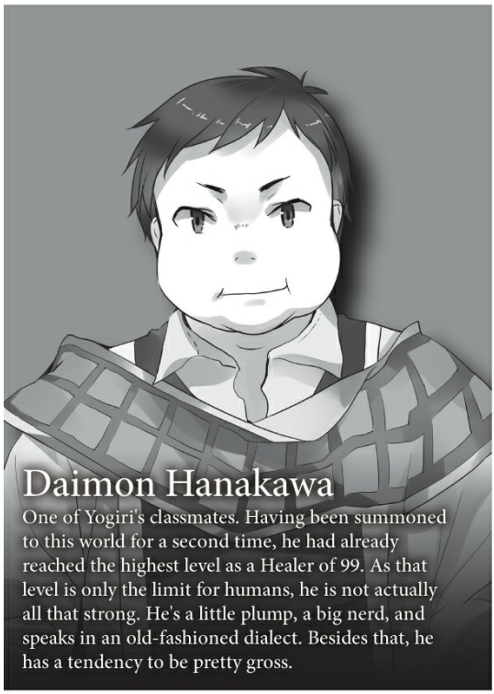


Ayaka Shinozaki

One of Yogiri's classmates, left behind as bait by the rest of the class. Her wealth and domineering personality led her to be hated by her classmates, so she had few friends. Yogiri had confirmed that she was dead when she was impaled through the chest by the dragon's attack, but...

Sage Sion

The Sage who summoned Yogiri's class and their bus into this world. The white dress she's wearing looks like a magical girl cosplay. She herself was formerly summoned into this world and became a Sage at the end of her own adventure, but due to her immense magical power, her common sense has lapsed somewhat since.



Daimon Hanakawa

One of Yogiri's classmates. Having been summoned to this world for a second time, he had already reached the highest level as a Healer of 99. As that level is only the limit for humans, he is not actually all that strong. He's a little plump, a big nerd, and speaks in an old-fashioned dialect. Besides that, he has a tendency to be pretty gross.

Lute

A spawn of the Dark God, one of the greatest threats to the world that had been sealed away by the Swordmaster and the Knights of the Divine King, a group with powers stemming from a different source than the Sages. Though he looks like a fairly average young boy, he is strong enough to press even Swordmasters and Sages hard. He is pursuing Yogiri to get revenge for the death of his master.

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ACT 1

Chapter 1 — Why Should I Have to Die Like This?!

Entering Diagnostic Mode. Determination of EX-Level state. Disconnecting virtual body from Personality Unit. Please awaken.

Ayaka Shinozaki opened her eyes as a voice rang out in her head. She was in an awfully strange position. Her arms and legs were caught on something, and her body was lying at an angle. She couldn't move very well. It wasn't like she couldn't move at all, but it felt like she was controlling her body from a distance.

After a bit of trial and error, she finally started to get the hang of it. Once she thought to move, there was a distinct time lag before her body would respond, so she just needed to go slowly and precisely. She started by pulling in her splayed arms and legs, after which she managed to push herself up into a seated position, where she could finally look around.

The rows of seats around her identified the tour bus she should have been in, but it took her a while to catch up to that conclusion. The back half of the bus was gone, leaving the remaining part slanted downwards. The aisle she was lying in was covered in a layer of blood. Looking ahead, she saw someone collapsed at the vehicle's exit. Judging from his uniform, it was a male student. He was sprawled across the walkway. There was a large hole in his stomach, meaning he was almost certainly dead. There was no way someone could take an injury like that and survive.

Next, she took stock of her own body. She, too, was covered in blood, with a large hole in her chest. But for some reason, unlike the guy in front of her, she was alive.

She tried to remember what had happened. They were on a school trip. The bus had suddenly been in a grassy field, a woman calling herself a Sage had appeared, then her classmates had left her behind and gone somewhere else.

Despite having absolutely no idea what was going on, she felt terribly

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calm, as if it were all happening to someone else.

Hello. Have you understood the current situation?

"Who are you?" she asked as the same voice that had awoken her echoed in her head again.

I am the Diagnostic Unit. And you are the Personality Unit. Together we are fundamental parts making up the individual Ayaka Shinozaki.

"I have no idea what that means," Ayaka replied in a flat voice. Of course she didn't understand, but she wasn't all that concerned about it.

It appears there is some confusion in your memory. Let us get that in order first. During the school trip, we were unexpectedly killed by a strange creature.

Ayaka recalled something punching through the roof of the bus and impaling her. Her classmates had told them there was a dragon circling around, so it made sense that she had been killed by that monster's attack.

To be precise, we received sufficient damage to render a human incapacitated and therefore simulated a death state. For you, there is no natural state of death as with humans.

Ayaka looked back at the hole in her own chest. At first glance, it looked pretty bad. The flesh had been torn apart, it was still bleeding profusely, and her internal organs were exposed. But no matter how human her insides looked, she couldn't help but doubt her eyes. Slowly, she reached a hand into the wound but felt nothing at all.

We are an artificial human, an imitation of life created from both organic and inorganic parts.

That revelation should have been a shock to her, but she found herself totally unmoved. The only thought that crossed her mind was, *Oh, is that so?*

"Then why are you talking to me now?"

Normally, in a situation where an ordinary human would die, we would maintain the imitated "death state" until our body was retrieved. However, we are unable to connect to the wireless network to signal for retrieval, and the external environment does not fit any of our predicted parameters. Even with durability beyond that of a human, the possibility for a total halting of all functions is high.

"By halting, you mean dying, right? I thought artificial humans couldn't die?"

True, as it pertains to living organisms, "death" is not applicable to us.

As long as our memory is preserved, even if this body should cease to function, resuscitation is possible. But that would only happen at the research facility. It is unlikely that waiting here will improve our situation any further. The damage we have sustained is beyond expected limits, and numerous critical internal organs have been lost. At this rate, we may lose the ability to take action entirely. An urgent response is required, for which reason I have contacted you.

"So basically, I'm the only one who can move this body?"

In a sense, that is correct. Controlling the body through you is the most efficient method.

"If I was hurt badly enough to die, I should just die, right? Is there a point in extending my life any longer?" She didn't know why she had been created in the first place, but if she was artificial, they could simply create a new version. At least, that was her line of thought at the moment. She wasn't particularly concerned about extending her own personal existence.

I don't know how you feel about it, but as the Project Execution Unit, it would be a problem for me if we died, a different voice answered. It appeared there were numerous units operating together, but giving each of them their own personality seemed like a waste of time and resources to her.

We do not possess personalities. The only one with an algorithmic simulation of emotions is the Personality Unit. If you detect personality traits in us, that is simply your subjective interpretation. In reality, there is no conversation happening. We are simply using the communication protocols set up between individual units.

"What's this project you're talking about?"

The project to create a new generation of humans. We are the third stage. The plan was to create an imitation of a human through a combination of organic and mechanical parts and observe its attempts to adapt to society — your reaction to this information seems a bit underwhelming, don't you think?

That is likely a result of being disconnected from the virtual body. Most emotion is derived from the physical body, or more specifically, the brain.

The disconnect must have been done to separate herself from the pain of her injuries. That explained why she felt so far away from her own body, and why it seemed like she had left her emotions behind.

That's true, but as the Project Execution Unit, an unnatural state like this

is difficult to approve of.

As the Medical Unit, I believe it is the optimal solution. If you want a natural state, the most natural state for this body right now would be death.

From the perspective of the Battle Unit, there is no benefit to fighting like this. The majority of our energy is being spent on maintaining life, like water being poured into a bottomless hole. Our energy reserves will soon be exhausted.

I've always wondered, is having a Battle Unit even useful?

For now, how about repairing the virtual body? At least to the point where the hole in the chest isn't visible.

That is unnecessary. Visual information will be masked so that the Personality Unit perceives no injuries.

I see...it would be an obstacle to the Personality Unit to continue in this state.

Emotions abruptly flooded back into Ayaka's head, plummeting her into a state of confusion.

"Hey! If you're going to do something like that, at least warn me first!"

My apologies. This is the first time we've had to take such an action.

So, what do you think? Do you still plan on dying here?

"Don't be stupid! Why should I have to die in a place like this?!"

Her previous air of detachment had evaporated. Ayaka looked over her body again. The hole in her chest appeared to be gone and everything seemed normal. Her uniform had been repaired, and even the blood soaking her clothes was gone. It was a rather impactful experience and made her doubt her own senses. She decided to leave the question of how real the world around her was for later, though. Getting caught up in such thoughts wouldn't be any use to her now.

"Okay, I understand that you're all in my head, and that I'm an artificial human. But what exactly do you want me to do?"

Compensation is required for lost components. Please acquire some organic matter.

Guessing what the Medical Unit was hinting at, Ayaka looked down at the body of the student lying in front of her. His name was Yuuichirou Kiryuu, one of the four who had been left behind on the bus. The hole in his gut made it seem like he had met the same fate as Ayaka.

"What do you mean, 'acquire'? Is this a joke? You think I'd ever get

desperate enough to eat another person?!"

Very well, we will not force you to do something you find unreasonable. At any rate, the present material would be insufficient.

I am also against the idea of using human matter. That conflicts with the Project.

"How much longer do I have?"

I predict roughly thirty minutes. Time was consumed by the arguing between the Units.

"Well, anyway, eating people or whatever is totally off limits!" Ayaka repeated, getting up from the floor.

Walking down the slanted aisle, she exited through the missing back of the vehicle. Although there were plenty of unbelievable things happening one after another, the most bizarre thing so far was the scenery around her. One moment, the bus had been driving through a snowy mountainscape, the next, it had popped into a spring-like grassland. It totally defied belief.

"I thought there were two others left behind as well. Do you know what happened to them?"

Those left in the bus were Yogiri Takatou and Tomochika Dannoura. It appears they did not die nearby.

"Do you not have any memories of when I was 'dead'?"

Dead people can't see or hear, can they? All we did was try to contact the laboratory.

"That's just being unnecessarily stubborn, don't you think?"

Certainly, we possess a lack of flexibility. But our objective has now changed. Our main priority is to exhaust every option and return to the laboratory by any means possible.

Ayaka looked around her at the grassy plains stretching out towards the horizon. There was a forest nearby, and in the far distance there seemed to be a city. A giant reptile of some sort was lying beside the bus. It must have been the dragon that had attacked them, killing her and Kiryuu. Just looking at it caused anger to start welling up in her chest.

Stepping closer, she kicked the creature in the head, which launched into the air, twisting the dragon's neck to a bizarre, unnatural angle. Ayaka stared dumbly at her handiwork. She had only kicked it lightly, expecting her foot to bounce harmlessly off it.

In order to allow movement in our current state, all restrictions have been

removed. Please be careful.

This amount of organic matter may be sufficient to replace our lost components.

It's certainly better than eating people.

"This thing?" Ayaka asked, looking over the fallen beast. It was covered in rough, solid scales. Finding a part of it soft enough to eat seemed like it would be a struggle in and of itself.

Though it is a creature unknown to us, it appears to be a kind of reptile, similar to dinosaurs said to have existed in the Mesozoic era. It is almost certainly a carbon-based life form.

Ayaka hesitated, but she had no other ideas. There were only thirty or so minutes left in which to act.

From my perspective as the Judgment Unit, I believe doing nothing and accepting death is an acceptable outcome in this situation. Should our memories be properly preserved, someone will certainly find us at some point.

If the goal was to create a human being, then concluding her life with death was only natural. It was like the unit was trying to say that dying here would still provide valuable information to their creators.

Ayaka thought it over. Could she just accept the idea of dying here? She had no particular desire to die. Her life so far had been fairly easy. If she continued, she would no doubt find happiness awaiting her in the future. She was only a high school junior. There were plenty of things she still had to do in life. Was she really prepared to kick the bucket out here in a place that she didn't even recognize?

"More importantly, why should I die just because those guys told me to?!"

Remembering her classmates, a violent anger began to burn in her gut. Why couldn't they have thought of a plan to let *everyone* escape? They had been all too happy to make the heartless choice to leave her behind. In almost no time at all, they had begun to discriminate against those who didn't have any powers. She couldn't forgive that. And most of all, she couldn't forgive that there were human beings out there who would dare to look down on her.

"What should I do?"

First, we should analyze its composition. Could you eat a small piece of it?

Ayaka punched a hand into the dragon's hide. Her fingers easily passed

through the tough scales and into the soft meat underneath. Tearing out a chunk, she brought it to her mouth. Normally, there would have been no way she could bring herself to do such a thing, but she was determined to take revenge on her classmates, and that would require her to survive for as long as possible. Those dark emotions made her capable of doing even something this revolting.

The dragon's flesh and blood tasted sweet, practically melting in her mouth as she chewed. At the same time, she was struck by an overwhelming hunger.

There appears to be no problem. About ten tons of matter should be sufficient.

I'm not certain I approve of eating a random animal we know nothing about. But it's better than eating people, I suppose.

It didn't take long for Ayaka to devour the majority of the carcass.

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Chapter 2 — Maybe I Should Be Acting a Bit More Hysterical

After traveling through the Garula Canyon for a few days, Tomochika and Yogiri finally reached the Meld Plains. They had made it this far using their armored truck. Now in the gap between the canyon and the plains, they had stopped to survey the landscape.

“It’s kind of different from what I expected,” Tomochika murmured from the driver’s seat. She had anticipated a green carpet stretching off into the distance — a plain rich with scenic beauty.

The Meld Plains were certainly beautiful, but it was a very different kind of beauty. Everything before their eyes was like crystal. The grass sprouting everywhere, the odd trees sticking up out of the ground, the lizards crawling around, and even what looked like the buildings of some sort of settlement...it all seemed to be made from a sharp-edged, translucent material. Even the sky had a sort of crystalline net draped over it, scattering the sunlight before it reached the ground.

On top of that, visibility in the area was rather poor. Although it was supposed to be a plain, they couldn’t see very far. The light reflecting off the ubiquitous crystal texture as well as the thin haze hanging over it all served to obstruct their view.

“Apparently they also call this place the Crystal Plains,” Yogiri said, his lack of surprise indicating he had known what they were going to see before they arrived.

“They should have called it that first! How do you even know?”

“I think the concierge told me about it when she gave me the map,” Yogiri replied unabashedly, leading Tomochika to decide it wasn’t that big of a deal.

“It looks like there’s a village or something over there. Are people living in this weird place?” she asked, changing the subject.

“I wouldn’t expect them to be ordinary people.” Everything here was sharp and hard-edged. It didn’t look like the kind of environment flesh and

blood humans could inhabit.

"Ah, I got it! There are probably crystal people living there. See, there's even a crystal dog walking around." They could see a small creature shuffling around the settlement. It was a four-legged animal made out of crystal. Judging from its shape and the way it moved, it gave off the impression of being a dog.

"It doesn't look like it's going to attack. I really hate having to kill dogs, so that's good." It seemed the creature was aware of them as they sat inside the vehicle, but it only looked curious.

"You like dogs?"

"I have a pet dog. She's pretty old, though, so I'm a bit worried about her."

"We have a dog too. My sister likes animals a lot, so we have all kinds of pets."

Yes, the Dannoura family traditionally cares for dogs of the Akita breed. The Dannoura School of Martial Arts has techniques that utilize them, after all! Mokomoko remarked, suddenly appearing between the two of them.

"So, that technique where he bites the back of someone's neck and spins around isn't something my sister taught him..." Tomochika had written it off as part of her sister's own eccentricities, but apparently it was a family-wide thing.

Regardless, I didn't come here to talk about dogs. There's a dangerous feeling about this place, so please proceed with caution!

"If you're that vague about it, we won't know what to be careful of."

I suppose you could call it a sort of curse. It seems to hang over this entire place. That being said, it's still at a level I can deal with.

"Takatou, you didn't randomly kill something again, did you?" He had once instinctively killed someone for being the source of an evil aura that he'd felt, and Tomochika was worried he might fall into that trap again.

"I've been more careful since then. Anyway, that curse or whatever it is doesn't seem to have a distinct source. It's so vague, I don't think it's much of a danger to us at the moment."

In that case, things were probably fine, Tomochika decided. "Putting that aside, there's nothing to do but go forward. Do you think the truck can handle it?"

It is *an armored vehicle. It's probably quite resistant to getting flats.*

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“I can just kill anything that gets in our way. I think it’ll be okay if I kill that grass-looking stuff.” Yogiri wasn’t quick-tempered enough to flat out kill anything that got in his way. He had his own rules for being considerate. But his idea of common sense often diverged quite a bit from what Tomochika was used to.

“If that’s really ‘grass,’ then it would never grow again, would it?”

“As long as the seeds are okay, it should be fine. I’m just killing the grass itself.”

“Well, from the map, the plains don’t look that big. Should we try to cross it all at once? It’s not a maze like the canyon was.”

The train tracks that led through the canyon also cut a straight line across the plains. If they just found and followed those tracks, they should be able to make it to the capital without a problem. If they wanted to avoid the plains, they would have to make a fairly wide detour.

I suspect we won’t be able to pass through a place as ominous as this without incident.

“I guess if this were a game, that just makes it the next phase after the canyon.”

“If we go to the right, we should find the tracks, shouldn’t we?” Yogiri asked, glancing at the map in Tomochika’s hands. “It looks like there’s a station there too.”

While the plains were rather wide from an east-to-west perspective, they were fairly narrow if one headed north or south. It looked like they could clear the current plain in an hour if they drove in a straight line.

“Let’s go take a look, then,” Tomochika decided, starting the engine. She had become quite accustomed to operating the vehicle at this point.

Perhaps thanks to Yogiri’s assistance, they were able to drive over the crystalline grass without issue, making her concerns about flat tires unnecessary. Following the map, they soon came across the tracks they were looking for. As expected, the area immediately surrounding the tracks hadn’t been crystallized. While it seemed the structures comprising the station had very nearly been converted into the alien material, they still held their original forms for the moment.

“Should we take a look inside the station? This place seems pretty odd, so I kind of want to see what information we can get, but...we’re basically ‘wanted’ now, aren’t we?”

They were clearly being targeted by the Sages, although Ryouta had made no effort to capture them despite being one of the Sage's attendants. It was hard to gauge what their standing with the public at large was.

"We can't sneak around forever. Do you plan on hiding when we get to the capital?"

Yogiri didn't seem the least bit concerned about whether they were being hunted. Tomochika used his confidence to steel herself, pulling up next to the station, which was itself a rather compact building. Considering the location, it wasn't that odd. It was hard to believe anyone would want to get on or off the train here.

As the two of them stepped out of the truck, they were immediately struck by a sudden drop in temperature.

"Wow, it's cold! Why did it change so quickly?!" Tomochika blurted out. Up until this point, the climate had been fairly warm, so it must have been something to do with the peculiar environment of the plains. Whether it was related to the overall climate or not, the crystalline landscape seemed visibly cold.

"It doesn't really look like ice, though, does it? Anyway, let's go inside."

Yogiri opened the door to the station. Inside was a waiting room filled with wooden benches arrayed around a central heater. Across from the entrance was another door that likely led to the ticket gate and platform.

"No one's here?" whispered Tomochika.

"It's not abandoned, is it? I mean, there's a heater and everything."

"Okay, let's go farther in, then."

As Tomochika made that suggestion, the door to the next room opened. A young man in uniform stepped out, but something was clearly wrong. His face was pale as he pressed his hands to his stomach, trying — and evidently failing — to stem the flow of blood coming from it.

Lurching into the room unsteadily, his eyes darted around wildly. He was very badly injured.

"Hey, are you okay?!" Tomochika made to hurry to his side, but Yogiri grabbed her and held her back.

A moment later, the dry sound of a gunshot filled the air, a sound Tomochika could instantly recognize from how often she had heard it back home. The young man collapsed to the floor, blood pooling around him. He had been shot through the heart from behind, dying instantly.

“Did you think he’d gotten away? Too bad!”

“Goddammit! Looks like I lost. Come on, if you’re just gonna die, hurry up and get on with it! Don’t waste my time like this!”

“Right? Shooting someone in the stomach isn’t enough to kill them right away.”

“You really are sick, though. Weren’t you leading him to his friends to save him?”

“If he doesn’t think there’s a way out for him, he won’t try that hard. It’s hardly worth placing bets if he doesn’t try.”

Five men in military uniforms made their way into the waiting room. All of them were holding pistols. Apparently, the weapons had been developed locally, as they were unfamiliar styles to Tomochika.

“Oh? I thought they said there was only the one guy here. Are we lucky or what?”

All of their gazes immediately snapped to Tomochika. They were vulgar, wicked looks that she had experienced numerous times since coming to this world.

“Die.”

The moment Yogiri spoke, the five men dropped to the floor. With nasty smiles still on their faces, they had died without even knowing it.

“What are we supposed to do with this situation?” Tomochika murmured, struggling to keep up with the rapid developments.

“The guy they shot is already dead, so there’s nothing we can do for him. And it doesn’t look like it had anything to do with us.”

Yogiri sounded somewhat dismissive, but Tomochika found it hard to blame him. She felt much the same way. It may have seemed a bit cold, but seeing someone die the moment she met them didn’t provoke much in the way of emotion from her.

“But now we have no idea what’s going on. Shouldn’t we at least have confirmed what they were doing here?”

“Except they were all planning on shooting me right away, so I didn’t really have a chance to talk to them.”

Yogiri was able to perceive both danger and killing intent. While there was something to be said from merely threatening people, there had been no room for less extreme measures this time.

“Couldn’t you have killed them one by one like before and threatened the

last guy...hold on, I'm starting to sound kind of sadistic all of a sudden! Forget what I just said!"

Seeing you unmoved by a scene like this gives me great confidence in having you as the next successor of the Dannoura line, Mokomoko said, folding her arms and nodding.

"Maybe I should start acting a bit more hysterical..." Tomochika replied, somehow feeling disheartened by Mokomoko's sterling evaluation of her.

Having been occupied with searching the dead men's bodies, Yogiri hadn't heard their little exchange. "Let's take the guns. You know about these things, right Mokomoko?"

Indeed. Their construction seems quite similar to those I am familiar with, so I imagine they function in the same way.

"It doesn't seem like they were carrying much stuff, so they might have a base nearby. I can't imagine they just happen to live around here."

"Couldn't they be soldiers from the capital?" If there were soldiers in a place like this, Tomochika's first thought was that they must be from the city.

"I don't know much about the capital or the country in general, so it's hard to say. Either way, we should probably move on sooner rather than later."

Yogiri quickly gave up on the station and made his way outside. Tomochika couldn't help but worry that killing those soldiers would cause trouble for them somewhere down the line.

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After making their way out of the crystal landscape, an enormous wall came into view. The tall structure stretched as far as they could see to either side. If that was the capital, it must have been fairly large.

"Looks like a fortress city. With a wall that big, it would be dark all day if you lived near the edge. Seems inconvenient." As Yogiri spoke idly from the passenger seat, Tomochika was still struggling to take her mind off what was behind them.

"Sorry, I thought I'd gotten used to this, but it really isn't feeling that way..." Though she had decided to pretend she hadn't seen anything, she couldn't help but regularly check her rearview mirror. Behind them lay a trail of corpses.

Who was it who said, "If you kill one person, you're a murderer; if you kill a thousand, you're a hero?" The boy is well on his way to becoming a hero, don't you think? Mokomoko remarked.

Far more than a thousand soldiers were now lying dead on the plains behind them. After leaving the station, Tomochika had followed the tracks leading to the capital. As they traveled, soldiers wearing the same uniforms as those from the station had attacked them. Naturally, Yogiri put a stop to it, but no matter how many he killed, they just kept coming.

Seeing that they weren't about to give up, Tomochika had tried to push on through them, but in the end, it looked like Yogiri had all but wiped out the organization. It made no sense that they continued to attack to the point of annihilation, so the pair had no idea why the soldiers had done it.

"It's their fault for attacking us. Anyway, this isn't the time for loitering. The rest of the class might have made it to the capital already," Yogiri said.

Time in the vicinity of the tower that had sealed away the Dark God was distorted, and it had taken them a considerable amount of time to make it this far on top of that. The trains were clearly running again, as they had seen several pass by while they drove. If their classmates had been riding one of those trains, they would have already reached the city.

"I'm kind of tired, so I'm going to take a nap," Yogiri commented, passing out in an instant.

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Chapter 3 — This World Isn't Round Like Earth Is?

Foundation Eater.

To talk about such a thing, an explanation of Celestial Foundations is necessary.

In simple terms, a Celestial Foundation is the vessel for a world, and could be considered the world in and of itself. On top of these foundations are placed the numerous things making up that world, and that is where intelligent life forms live. This is of course on a conceptual level, so, for example, in the world that Yogiri and Tomochika originally came from, one can say that space was laid on top of that foundation. In the world they are currently in, the land and sea are laid directly on top of the foundation instead. In short, the Celestial Foundation is what an observer would refer to as the base of the world.

There are countless Celestial Foundations, all floating in a space known as the "Sea." The individual foundations are like bubbles in this Sea. By the way, as we are comparing it to the ocean, the Sea also has a depth. If foundations are at the same relative depth, traveling between them is simple. Moving to a foundation at a lower depth is even easier, but moving up in the Sea is much more difficult. Doing so requires an enormous amount of energy. That is one of the reasons it is not so easy for Yogiri and Tomochika to return to their own world.

Now that you know about Celestial Foundations, let's talk about the Foundation Eaters. They are creatures inhabiting the Sea, also referred to as "Deep Sea Fish." They can move freely throughout the Sea, and feed off the foundations. In short, they are beings that eat worlds.

For some worlds with higher-level intelligences like gods, the situation is different, but in most cases the residents of those worlds have no way of perceiving the Foundation Eaters. The worlds those creatures consume are immediately destroyed, broken down, and digested all at once. For the

unfortunate residents, it is like existence itself simply stops without warning.

The behavior of the Foundation Eaters is also easy enough to predict. They swim around in the Sea, and if they happen upon a foundation, they eat it. If they meet with any resistance, they will fight, but if they feel they can't win or that it's not worth the trouble, they will run away.

While that is the limit of their instincts, in the vast span of eternity, a small number of them have managed to awaken a greater level of intelligence within themselves. Once that happens, their behavior becomes much more idiosyncratic, but in the end they always try to make contact with the intelligences within the foundations themselves. For such self-aware creatures, the Sea is a place of endless boredom.

The Meld Plains that our two protagonists have just passed through housed one such Foundation Eater, hidden in the form of a person, who had grown tired of the Sea.

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Tomochika parked the truck just outside the gate to the capital. Yogiri was still asleep, so she figured she'd wait for him to wake up before heading inside.

Those foundations are enclosed within boundaries known as canopies. That is an example of the "bubbles" I mentioned in my earlier explanation of the Sea.

"You know that all sounds incredibly hard to believe, right?"

Perhaps. But if you argued by citing cosmological theory instead of saying, "Wow, I don't believe it!" then your objections would hold more merit. What do you really know about the world around you?

Hunched over the steering wheel, Tomochika was passing the time by chatting with Mokomoko. While the ghost was irritating in a lot of ways, she was at least useful for conversation when there was nothing else to do.

"But that goes against all common sense, doesn't it? And why would you know anything about it in the first place?"

As a high-level divine spirit, I have access to the upper-level layers of information. As such, I have knowledge of the whole Celestial Foundation World System.

"So, did you know worlds like this existed from the start?"

In a manner of speaking. But I never would have expected a world where the land and sea are flat, and the water just runs off the side like a waterfall.

"Wait, this world isn't round like Earth is?"

So it seems.

"If you know that much, shouldn't you have a map of the whole world in your head? Why were we stuck in that canyon for so long?"

I don't have access rights to information about this world. I'm only aware of the most basic facts about it.

"Then what about our home? That whatever-layer connects to all worlds, right? And you can, like, search through it?"

It also has region restrictions. From this place, the information I can access is limited.

"So, wait, there are region locks too?! For a high-level divine spirit, you don't seem that useful!"

For the record, "region locking" is a computer term. It's used to refer to things like games from other countries that you can't buy within Japan.

As a divine spirit of the Dannoura family and territory, once separated from that land, my true power cannot be exercised.

As the conversation fell into a lull, Tomochika sighed. "Man...are we ever going to be able to go home?"

Their objective had been to get back to their own world, but they had yet to find any concrete clues towards that end. According to Mokomoko's explanation, this world existed at the bottom of the "Sea," so returning to their world would require an enormous amount of energy. At worst, they might have to come to terms with living in this world forever.

What would I even do here? Tomochika wondered. Living expenses didn't seem like they would be an issue. The investments they had made through the concierge would continue to make them money, and the cash and valuables they had on them now would be sufficient to sustain them for a while. There were cities developed enough to present no issues to someone from modern Japan, so daily life theoretically wouldn't be an issue for them, either. But even so, it seemed doubtful they could live too comfortably in this world.

The biggest issue here was public order. The number of people with a few too many screws loose couldn't be understated. To them, human life was about as valuable as trash, so they lived with reckless abandon, wielding their

various powers as they pleased. No matter how modestly she and Yogiri tried to live, the moment someone like that appeared, it would all be for nothing.

Honestly, if it hadn't been for Yogiri, she would have been totally helpless. Tomochika glanced over at him, where he sat still asleep in the passenger seat. He looked so innocent, it was hard to believe he could kill anyone and everyone.

Why not just live with him?

"Wait, what? Are you reading my mind or something?!" Tomochika jumped, surprised at Mokomoko bringing up the same topic she had just been thinking about.

Unfortunately, I don't possess such a convenient power. All I need is my own insight. Haven't you realized that you're like an open book?

"Well, sorry for being so easy to read," she said, puffing out her cheeks in annoyance. She had indeed been thinking she might just live out the rest of her days with Yogiri if it came to that.

Well, he isn't so bad. At least he looks attractive enough. He seems plenty worthy to join the Dannoura bloodline.

"What are you talking about?!"

Is it that much of a leap? If you can't go back, then all that remains is to rebuild the Dannoura line in this world. Or, what, is there some other man you've taken a liking to?

"No, there's no one like that, but...Takatou has to make his own choice, right?" She felt like she was falling too much into his debt. With no other options available, a relationship between them seemed far too practical to have any sense of romance to it. Or at least, that was her impression.

I'm sure he's been feeling the same way, though. And look, he's awake. Why not ask him yourself?

"That whole conversation is a secret, okay?!"

"What is?" Yogiri asked, rubbing his eyes as he sat back up.

"Nothing! Anyway, we're at the capital, so what next?"

Still half asleep, her companion began to look around, prompting Tomochika to follow suit. The first thing that jumped out at them was the massive castle wall. It seemed far larger than necessary, being at least fifty meters tall. The gates were also similarly large, wide enough that five of their trucks could probably pass through side by side.

"Can we just drive in?"

“I don’t see why not. It looks like people are going straight through the gates.”

Every once in a while, carriages and other vehicles passed by and into the city. It didn’t seem the entrance was being guarded, so getting in wouldn’t be a problem.

“Speaking of which, there are some pretty normal-looking cars here.” Though there were a wide array of different vehicles around them, they looked rather simple compared to the armored truck the duo was currently sitting in.

By the way, did you notice we’re surrounded?

Tomochika snapped out of her thoughts. At some point, people wearing military uniforms had taken up positions around them.

“It doesn’t seem like they plan on attacking us...I guess it’s normal for them to come out and check out a suspicious vehicle that’s stopped outside the gates.”

If even Yogiri hadn’t noticed, that must have meant the soldiers had no intention of harming them. But given the way the guards were pointing their staves at the truck, it was clear they were prepared for a fight. No doubt they would attack if they saw any questionable movements from them.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I thought we didn’t have to sneak around anymore!” Tomochika said sarcastically. She hadn’t expected the city to be this well-guarded, but they were driving a vehicle developed by those working for the Sages. It was possible that there was a hostile relationship between the country and their “guardians.” That had never crossed her mind. “And you didn’t notice until they’d already surrounded us either, Mokomoko?”

It appears they used some sort of technique for hiding their presence. It seems to only function from a distance, though.

“They look different from the guys we saw on the plains. If these are the soldiers from the capital, I wonder who those others were?”

The capital uniforms were nothing like those of their earlier attackers. While a difference in allegiance would lead them to expect different uniforms, these were unalike even in their fundamental design. It seemed to Yogiri that the soldiers on the plains had been entirely unrelated to the kingdom.

After a few moments, a representative stepped forward, facing them just in front of the truck.

“They are totally staring us down.”

“It doesn’t seem like they’ll leave, even if we don’t do anything.”

The representative met Tomochika’s eyes before beginning to speak. She lowered the side window in order to hear him properly.

“My apologies, but could you please step out of the vehicle?” he asked.

“We might as well do what they say,” Yogiri shrugged. “At least they don’t seem to be criminals.”

“Well...okay, for now I guess we can talk to them. As long as they don’t try to arrest us.”

“If they try to restrain us in any way, we’ll just resist.”

“Yeah...resist...”

If Yogiri “resisted,” that would mean a new mountain of corpses. Tomochika wanted to avoid that as much as possible, but if they couldn’t settle things peacefully, there wasn’t much she could do about it. Keeping that possibility in mind, she calmly stepped out of the truck.

“Hello, miss. My name is Torques, and I am in charge of security for the south gate. After hearing reports of a strange vehicle parked outside, we came to investigate. If memory serves, I believe this vehicle belongs to the Immortal Corps?”

“Ah, now that you mention it, I guess they were using it, weren’t they?” Considering the insane actions of that group, it wasn’t surprising that their vehicles were infamous.

“We aren’t part of the Immortal Corps,” Yogiri stated. “We were given this truck by Ryouta, the lord of Hanabusa.”

“Is that so?” said Torques, narrowing his eyes.

“Takatou! He totally doesn’t believe you!” Tomochika whispered.

“Either way,” the guard continued, “that makes you connected to Sage Lain, is that correct?” The area around Hanabusa had indeed been Lain’s jurisdiction. On top of that, the Immortal Corps were her subordinates, so it wasn’t a difficult connection to make. “I’m sure you are aware, but the area around the Kingdom of Manii’s capital is now under the control of Sir Santarou. He has warned us to be wary of incursions by the Immortal Corps into his territory, so we have been keeping a close watch. We have been instructed to repel them by force, if necessary.”

All at once, the gathered soldiers began to grow tense.

“Well, that’s an issue,” Yogiri replied. “As I said, we’re not connected to

the Immortal Corps at all — oh, that's right! We're Sage candidates summoned by Sage Sion. We came here for the trials that she's set out for us."

"We did receive word from Lady Sion, and a group of candidates did already reach the city...but I was never told that any additional candidates would be arriving late." Torques's suspicion was growing ever deeper.

"Man, this is just getting annoying!"

"If you are truly Sage candidates, then you have received the Gift, have you not? May I inspect you?"

"Go ahead."

"Are you sure?" Tomochika whispered again, confused by how fast Yogiri had agreed.

"It's fine. Let's just trust in Celestina."

Hearing that, Tomochika remembered that, thanks to the concierge Celestina, they had items to help them fake their Statuses.

At Torques's beckoning, a mage emerged from the encircling guards and immediately made his report. Apparently, he could tell with a single look.

"I see. It certainly appears that you are Sage candidates. But such a thing is easy to fake, so it serves as a secondary confirmation at best."

"Now what are we supposed to do?!"

They couldn't kill ordinary guards just to get into the city, and at this rate they'd have plenty of problems inside, anyway. As Tomochika tried to think of a way for them to escape, Yogiri began fishing around in his pocket.

"Now that I think about it, Rick did give me something in case we had trouble getting in."

He pulled out two pendants. The head of each was a circle engraved with an intricate pattern. The guards immediately dropped to their knees upon seeing them.

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“Uh, what are those?” Tomochika asked.

“I got them from Rick. Oh, this one is for you. I forgot to hand it over earlier.”

Tomochika took the pendant from Yogiri. Rick was the swordsman they had met in the canyon. A number of things had happened there, and in the end, he had become a Swordmaster. Although Tomochika hadn’t been around at the time, he’d apparently had a discussion with Yogiri before they parted ways.

“Wait, who exactly *is* Rick, really?!”

With nothing more than a glimpse of these two small pendants, the guards surrounding them had completely changed their tunes.

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Chapter 4 — There's No Way I Can Beat Someone Who Can Shoot Beams From His Sword!

Yogiri stared at the pendant in his hand. On the end of the gold chain was a circular ornament about the size of a coin. The design on it depicted a dragon, sword, and lion.

While the delicate engraving certainly did suggest that it was an item of considerable value, the behavior of the guards upon seeing it still seemed rather bizarre. The men who had been interrogating them moments earlier were now kneeling dutifully before them. It must have been entirely due to them seeing the pendant, but it was strange that they'd be able to make out the design from so far away.

"Uh, what is this?" Tomochika asked, just as confused as Yogiri.

"No idea. Why don't we ask them?" He turned expectantly to the man who had identified himself as the head of security for the South Gate.

"That is an amulet engraved with the emblem of the Royal Family. As a token that carries their authority, it serves as an order to those loyal to them."

"You were just suggesting that we're faking having the Gift. Are you not worried this might be a fake too?"

"We would never mistake the authority of the King," Torques replied instantly. Yogiri couldn't understand his reasoning, but the guard seemed absolutely sure of himself.

"And you don't know about this authority unless we show it to you?"

"Correct. There is, of course, no way for us to tell while it is in your pocket."

"So then, can we go through?"

"Of course —"

"Can you wait a minute, please?" a voice called out from behind Yogiri. Turning around, he saw a man wearing the same uniform as the guards step

out from behind the truck. He seemed to be part of the troop, but had a somewhat different air about him.

Yogiri showed him the amulet, assuming the man just hadn't been able to see it from behind the vehicle. He figured if the amulet was enough to make the guards obey him, he could skip over a lot of potentially irritating parts of this encounter.

"It seems you've misunderstood something. That amulet only displays the will of the Royal Family. It's not something you can use to simply make us all do as you say." The man spoke with an overflowing confidence, clearly looking down on them.

"Oh, really?"

"Indeed," Torques replied, adding his own warning. "It exists only to show the will of the Royal Family. Our subservience comes from our loyalty to Richard himself. Please don't think it will give you a free pass to do whatever you please."

Apparently, it wasn't as convenient of an item as Yogiri had hoped.

"My name is David," the new arrival said. "I possess the lowest seat in the Royal Family, so I'm not particularly worried about Richard."

"David! Control your tongue!" Torques snapped.

"I'm the vice-captain here. If the captain makes a poor decision, it is my job to stop him, isn't it? Yes, I see the amulet is certainly one of Richard's. That tells us two things. The first is that we should provide whatever accommodations we can for you. There is no issue with that. I imagine you met Richard somewhere and befriended him. But what about the other meaning, indicating that you two are Knights of the Divine King?"

"Knight of the Divine King" was a title bestowed upon one who had passed the trials in the Swordmaster's tower. The moment they had reached the first floor, that title had been automatically awarded to Yogiri and Tomochika.

"If you're a Knight, then you should have a holy sword handed down by the Swordmaster. Can you show me? If you do, I'll believe you."

"But we weren't given anything like that. Oh, wait, didn't he mention something about swords?"

"These things are important, Takatou! Please try to remember them!"

"Well, Rick became the Swordmaster, but since the tower was destroyed, he said they couldn't make holy swords right away. So he gave me these

amulets instead." Yogiri's memory was actually quite good, but that only applied to things he made a point to remember. At the time, he had accepted the amulets from Rick without thinking too much about it.

"Well, you've outed yourselves now. Richard, a Swordmaster? Don't be ridiculous."

"I don't know what you want me to say," Yogiri replied, scratching his head. He had thought the amulets would be enough to get them through situations like this, but they seemed to have reached an impasse. He had no intention of lying, but there wasn't much he could do to prove his claims, either. The fact was, it was all starting to become a pain.

"If you are truly Knights, then show me your skills with a sword!" David challenged, drawing his own weapon.

"David! What are you doing?!"

"It's simple. Someone who fails to defeat even me, someone who has no title at all, couldn't possibly be a Knight of the Divine King." He turned back to the two teens. "So, what will it be?"

Torques fell silent, unable to argue the point, while Yogiri and Tomochika exchanged a look.

"Now what?"

"Maybe we should back off for now? Let's try to find a more peaceful way of getting into the city."

Now, now, Tomochika, why don't you *just fight him?* Mokomoko offered.

"Right, if I 'just fight him' then we can *easily* get through," she replied sarcastically. "There's no way I could beat someone who can shoot beams from his sword!"

Fear not. This individual possesses no such abilities!

"Really? Even so..."

"Why don't you give it a shot?" Yogiri suggested. "If things look dangerous, I'll step in. If we can't get into the capital, it'll be a real problem for us. You say we should find another way, but I honestly can't think of anything."

After hesitating for a short while, Tomochika gave in and decided to fight.

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Tomochika stood five meters away from David. The vice-captain's

weapon was a double-edged longsword, about a meter long. Tomochika had a *kodachi*, a single-bladed Japanese shortsword of about fifty centimeters, which Ryouta had included in the supplies he had prepared for them in Hanabusa.

The guards made a circle around the two, which Yogiri joined. It didn't seem like there were any traps, and the only one with any killing intent at the moment was David.

"If she wins, you'll recognize us as Knights and let us into the capital, right?" Yogiri confirmed, standing beside Torques.

"Yes, of course. We don't normally restrict entry into the city, and for us, Richard's amulet is proof enough to grant you passage, but I can't overrule the vice-captain's objections."

The guard named David seemed to have some degree of royal blood, but his relationship with the captain was obviously more complicated than that.

"Takatou, why are you standing around like you're a spectator?! You're my second here, come on!" Tomochika shouted as Yogiri chatted with the guard.

Yogiri stepped into the circle and took up a position at her side. "What, do you want to swap?" he asked. She did look pretty stressed about the whole situation, and he didn't want to push her into something she wasn't ready for.

"Can you even use a sword?"

"I can pretend. If I just kill him and then stab him after he's dead, it would be pretty believable, right?"

"You think a cheap trick like that would work?"

I would prefer that you leave things up to Tomochika. She has relied on you for too long. The ghost turned to her descendant. *You feel that you should do more for yourself as well, don't you?*

"Well, yeah, but do you think I can actually beat this guy? Oh...what about that weapon from the robot?" Tomochika still had the transforming gear the Aggressor had given her. If she used it, an opponent with nothing but a longsword would be no challenge at all.

You will not use it this time. You will have no need for such a thing, Mokomoko declared with absolute confidence.

"But the people of this world all have the Gift, don't they?"

This man is an ordinary human. Those who can use the Gift are somewhat rare in this world. I haven't been idly floating around after you two, you

know. I've been doing some research of my own. And while my abilities are not as thorough as someone's Discernment skill might be, I can get a general feel for the overall strengths of others.

"I wasn't too worried about it before, but are the people of this world all that different from us?"

To make a long story short, the humans of this world are effectively the same as those from ours. As such, the Dannoura School of Martial Arts will be more than sufficient for dispatching them.

"What do you mean?" Yogiri asked, his curiosity piqued.

The Dannoura School primarily consists of techniques designed specially for fighting humans. The practice utilizes techniques based on the construction of the human body, natural reflexes, and even psychology. As such, its potential effectiveness was among the first things that I investigated upon reaching this world. And even if they had been very different in construction from the humans of our world, we would need only make some changes to compensate for that. The Dannoura School marches ever forward in its evolution! Stopping is forbidden!

"But there are, like, beastkin and things here, remember?" Tomochika asked. "What about them?"

They are essentially human. The majority of our techniques will still be effective against them. They are somewhat akin to Chimeras. Genetic information from animals was merged with human DNA...but that's not important right now.

"That makes me even more curious."

"Shall we begin?" David interrupted, apparently sick of waiting for their conversation to finish. "Hey, someone give us a starting signal!"

Captain Torques took a step forward. "This contest will be one-on-one. No outside intervention will be permitted. The match will be decided when one party is unable to continue or concedes. That said, there is no need for killing. If I give the signal, the fight will be considered over. Is that acceptable?"

Based on this explanation, aside from being a one-on-one, it seemed like anything went. The two duelists nodded.

"Begin!" As Torques indicated the start of the match, Yogiri backed out of the way.

The battle began quietly with David raising his sword above his head.

Hmm. Similar to the roof-guard of Western swordsmanship. In simple terms, it is the same as the Japanese Joudan *stance.*

Tomochika turned her body to lead with her shoulder, as if taking a fencing stance, pointing her sword directly at her opponent's face. Her left hand was held behind her, resting on her hip, as she began to wave the tip back and forth.

"Worst case, I'll just kill him, so I'm not that worried...but do you think she can actually beat him?" Yogiri didn't feel the need to play along with David's game. The guard had challenged them, so there was no obligation for him to hold back. He could easily dispatch the vice-captain and move on.

Worry not, this is an excellent opportunity for her. Absolutely do not interfere.

"Her opponent seems confident enough."

He is well practiced. He also seems quite certain that you two do not possess the Gift.

"Even through our disguise? We're supposed to look like we're secretly Sage candidates."

As the two of them had previously been given rings to hide their real Stats, they could disguise themselves as either Sage candidates or ordinary humans, although at the moment the rings were set to show them as the former.

Yes, well...while your Stats indicate that you are Sage candidates, they don't seem to display a particularly effective form of the Gift. In short, you both look quite weak.

"I guess that makes sense. It would be awkward if it listed a power we don't actually have." But that was an issue in and of itself. It seemed they would have to look into how exactly the rings hid their Stats. "This guy's got a pretty standard combat style, but the Dannoura style is very different, right?"

To Yogiri, Tomochika's stance looked pretty strange. He had no idea how she would actually be able to fight like that.

Oh? Are you interested in the Dannoura School? Very well, allow me to enlighten you!

"Yeah, I'm a bit curious."

The Dannoura School's motto is, "Anything goes! Express your own eccentricities!" Something like that. If you are going to fight, find the most

underhanded strategy and execute it without hesitation. That is what we teach. Asking for fairness in a fight to the death is absurd. Once you die, there's nothing left, after all.

"Doesn't that make her a pretty bad successor?" Yogiri asked, recalling Tomochika's feelings about killing so far. It seemed like a style of fighting that didn't suit her at all.

Well, she is rather honest deep down. It is true she is not particularly well suited to deception, but there are other reasons she is ideal for the role. Ah, it appears they have begun.

"It looks like they're just staring at each other to me."

Her opponent seems intent on leveraging his superior reach. If she charges at him, he need only bring his sword down on her, so there is no need for him to act first. But Tomochika is already making her move.

Now that she mentioned it, Yogiri noticed that Tomochika had narrowed her stance, moving her left foot directly behind her right as she inched forward.

She has hidden her left foot from the enemy. She is closing the distance between them while pulling her sword ever so slightly backwards, to give the illusion that she isn't moving at all. While it doesn't sound like much to explain, it is a rather clever trick. Now that he'll no longer have an accurate idea of her range, she will be attacking soon, Mokomoko declared.

It would only be a moment before her challenger was writhing on the ground.

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Seeing her opponent wield his sword in a high-guard stance, Tomochika was a bit afraid. All she had to defend herself with was the shortsword in her hand, and judging from the weight alone, it seemed unlikely to be a reliable defense. If she took a direct attack, she'd be dead — an obvious conclusion, so she was understandably concerned.

But she didn't shrink away from that fear. All of that was to be expected when facing another's blade. Even now, she was slowly closing the distance between them. She moved her feet in small enough increments that the movements weren't obvious, keeping her eyes locked on his. She had the timing down. Her plan was simple enough.

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The moment he blinked, she flew into action. Throwing her sword a short distance into the air, she lurched towards him. As she fell almost parallel to the ground, she kicked off the dirt and slid forward, closing the distance between them in one smooth motion. Whipping her left hand around to grab the back of her opponent's knee, she tried to sweep his leg out from under him while pulling herself upright.

She had hoped it would be enough to knock him over, but his feet were firmly planted, so instead, she used the opening it had created to circle around behind him. Now that she was there, the rest was easy. Even unarmed, there were plenty of critical weak points she could exploit from the back.

In response to her trying to sweep his leg out, David had opened his stance wide. Tomochika brought her foot up between his legs as hard as she could.

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Yogiri had no idea what had happened. By the time he realized what was going on, Tomochika's sword was on the ground and the man was on his knees, clutching his groin. Tomochika stood behind him, studying her handiwork.

A fake vanishing technique. It must have seemed to him like she just disappeared, Mokomoko mused.

"What do you mean by fake?"

There were many actions required before she "disappeared." She lined up her actions with the moment her opponent blinked, threw her sword to snare his attention, and dropped her own body to escape his field of view. The process involved is what makes it "fake." A true vanishing technique wouldn't require such tricks. Though it pains me to admit he was not from the Dannoura School, I once knew a martial arts master who could disappear from sight without any tricks at all.

Yogiri was impressed. He had thought the Dannoura School pitch was just Mokomoko talking big this whole time, but it actually seemed to be quite useful.

"Looks like I win," Tomochika remarked. "Or would you like me to finish him off?"

"Th-The match is decided!" Torques called out hurriedly, declaring her the victor.

The gathered guards began to cheer. Apparently David wasn't all that popular.

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Chapter 5 — The Martial Arts in This Other World Are So Primitive, the Super-Developed Dannoura Style Looks Like Magic to Them!

"What *was* that?"

"Is that the Swordmaster's Gift? The one Heroes use?"

"No, there's no way she could sneak it past me. There wasn't any magic in it at all. That was a display of pure martial arts!"

"It was way too fast! Can humans really move like that?!"

"If someone used that with the Gift, how strong would they be?"

"No, if you weren't that strong in the first place, you'd never make it as a Knight."

"And that boy is a Knight too, right? Is he as strong as her?"

The guards were praising Tomochika one after another. Mokomoko seemed extremely pleased as she watched them.

Yes, yes! At this rate, the Dannoura School will gain fame even in this world!

"Uhh...are you sure everyone should just leave him on the ground like that?" Yogiri wondered. The man that Tomochika had fought was still doubled over in obvious pain. As a boy himself, Yogiri couldn't help but feel some sympathy for him.

Of course, as a woman, I don't know the details, but I am told it is a pain worse than hell. At least she only kicked him. It's not like they will be crushed or anything. If they aren't held firmly in place, destroying them is actually surprisingly difficult. But don't think that means it is impossible! The Dannoura School also possesses a technique to crush them completely!

"Sounds like you've got a bit of an obsession to me."

These techniques exist in all sorts of underhanded styles across all of time and space. Carelessness with the undercarriage begets punishment, don't you

think? I can instruct you as well, if you wish. It may prove useful in the future.

"I think I'll pass." Yogiri had no desire to learn such an "art" in detail. He considered that as Tomochika returned.

"Well, it looks like I won somehow, even though I only kicked him. Are you sure that counts?"

And so begins a new story, 'The Martial Arts in This Other World Are So Primitive, the Super-Developed Dannoura Style Looks Like Magic to Them!'

"Why do all these titles of yours have to be so long?!"

"It seems your demonstration was fine," Yogiri commented, glancing at the guards around them. He had considered the possibility that the guards might attack them if she won, but it seemed the likelihood of that was low. "So, we can go into the capital now?" he asked Torques as the captain approached.

"Yes. To be honest, if you hadn't arrived in such a strange vehicle, we never would have stopped you in the first place."

Entry to the capital wasn't strictly controlled. The guards had only come to investigate after hearing about a suspicious truck being parked outside the gates.

"So, I guess we shouldn't take the vehicle into the city, then."

"That would be best. If you came across someone who recognized it as belonging to the Immortal Corps, it would only cause you further trouble."

"I guess we'll leave it here. But are you sure that won't cause its own sort of trouble?" He didn't feel right just letting it sit outside the city. As an armored vehicle, it was pretty tough, but it still made him uneasy from a security standpoint. With enough time, someone could eventually find a way to break in. "Mokomoko, can you put a curse on it or something?"

A curse, eh? Perhaps it is not impossible, but giving someone an electric shock the moment they touch the door, or something similar, is the best I can manage in this world.

"That doesn't sound like much of a curse. Wouldn't that just happen anyway?" asked Tomochika.

"Excuse me," Torques interrupted with a look of confusion, "it looks like you're speaking to someone, but..."

"Oh, right, what do you call it..." Yogiri answered. "We have something like a ghost with us." They had been deep in conversation with Mokomoko

this whole time, so it was impossible to make excuses for it now.

I am not just a ghost!

"I see. So, Knights of the Divine King can interact with spirits as well. But that might pose something of an issue. Within the capital, magic and other mystical beings don't function very well."

"Oh, really?" Tomochika turned to Mokomoko.

It seems similar to that horrible tower. While I doubt it is enough to incapacitate me, I will most certainly be weakened by it.

"I guess it doesn't really matter. You don't do much anyway, so what difference does it make?"

Could you please try to respect your ancestors a little more?

"In that case, why not allow us to watch the vehicle for you?" Torques suggested.

"Are you sure?"

"As I said, we are supposed to make accommodations for you, so storing your truck is no problem at all."

"Then I guess we'll take advantage of your offer. But come on, are you *sure* that guy doesn't need help?" Yogiri looked back at David, unable to get him out of his mind. The guy seemed to be in incredible pain.

"What? I don't think I kicked him that hard..."

"You kicked him as hard as you could, didn't you?" Yogiri quipped.

"Wait, those guys with staves can use magic, can't they?" she asked, quickly trying to shift the blame. "Can't they heal injuries?"

"As Sage candidates, you are from a different world, so you aren't familiar with how magic works here, correct?"

"Yeah, all we know is that they usually need a staff for magic." That was the extent of the knowledge they had obtained from being attacked by a magic-wielder during their journey.

"First of all, not every mage can use every type of magic. Each has his or her own strengths and weaknesses. Those who are able to use healing magic are actually quite rare."

"So, there's no one around who can use healing magic?"

"As an arm of the military, we certainly have someone who is capable of it, but...it is not terribly convenient. First of all, pain from something that has already happened cannot be erased. In addition, the healing itself causes a considerable amount of pain, so healing magic is only used for especially

serious injuries."

"What about anesthetics?"

"Those serve to dull the effects of the healing magic as well."

Healing magic did seem to be more trouble than it was worth.

"In that case, you should lie him down on his side and let him rest. My dad always did that," Tomochika remarked, as if the thought had just occurred to her.

"Should I even ask?" Yogiri muttered, giving Mokomoko a dejected look.

For the sake of the Dannoura family's honor, let's just say that being on guard against attacks to that part of the body is a given, thus leading to a heightened sensitivity in that area even in other pursuits.

Tomochika's stance hadn't been facing her opponent straight on. That must have been a precaution to protect her own weak points.

Of course, there are also techniques for use against opponents who are on guard against such attacks, but the primary reason is that her father was far too soft on his daughters. He would never go all out in training and didn't properly defend himself, so he was always getting kicked in inconvenient places.

Yogiri wasn't sure he believed her. No matter how much their father might have spoiled them, if there was a real gap in skill between them, he shouldn't have been taking those kinds of hits even if he was going easy. Which meant that he must have been taking the hits intentionally.

Assuming it wasn't just a weird kink of his, perhaps he'd been trying to drive home how effective such attacks — a technique effective against all men — could be.

Well, maybe that *could* be considered being soft on them. Or maybe Yogiri was just overthinking it all.

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The pair drove their armored truck into the city through a gate that was normally reserved for the local garrison. Within was a base reserved for the defense of the South Gate.

After parking the vehicle near the wall where it would be out of the way, they disembarked. Yogiri had already transferred what he needed from the truck to his backpack, so while he was waiting for Tomochika to do the same,

he went to take a look at something that had caught his eye.

The walls of the capital were extraordinarily tall, but that alone was something construction techniques should have been able to account for. He couldn't help but feel they were unnaturally white, though. There wasn't a single spot of dirt on them anywhere. As far as he could see, the walls that surrounded the entire capital were similarly clean.

Yogiri stepped up and extended a hand towards the smooth stone. A few inches from the wall itself, his fingers hit something. He couldn't *see* anything blocking the way, but there was certainly something there. If he pushed, he could get his fingers a little closer, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't quite reach the wall itself. It was like the entire surface was covered by an invisible layer of rubber.

"There's magic on the walls," a voice called out from behind as he was enjoying himself with the experiment.

"Feeling better?"

"Yes, somehow." It was David. He was walking normally now, so there didn't seem to be any lasting damage. "These walls were built by High Wizard Eglacia long ago. It is said they can resist any attack."

"High Wizard Eglacia...I feel like I've heard that name before. Oh, that golden guy?"

In the depths of the Garula Canyon stood a tower that had been built to seal away a being called the Dark God. During the trials that he and Tomochika had gone through there, Yogiri had encountered someone by that name. The man had worn a golden robe and was decked out in all sorts of gaudy jewelry.

"It is true, in the legends he was said to always clothe himself in gold. You know of him?"

"A little." Considering Yogiri had in fact killed that very High Wizard not long before, he quickly changed the subject. "Anyway, you seemed to think we were pretty dangerous when we first met."

"Well...in the end, I did lose. I have to admit that."

"Oh, thank goodness. I'm glad you're okay!" Tomochika cried as she jumped down from the armored truck's roof rack. She was wearing a backpack and carrying a large suitcase.

"Y-Yes, I'm fine," the vice-captain replied, his expression tightening a little.

“Did you need something?” Tomochika asked, wondering why he was standing there.

“You said you were here to meet the other Sage candidates, correct? I thought I might guide you to them, if you wish.”

At David’s generous offer, Tomochika and Yogiri shared a look of surprise.

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Chapter 6 — He May Not Be a Bad Person, but He Seems Kind of Annoying

“The reason I can’t acknowledge your strength is because it would be like trampling over all of my own hard work. Being stuck here making all kinds of excuses for myself is something my pride cannot allow!”

“Wow. He doesn’t seem like a bad person, but he is kind of annoying,” Tomochika muttered.

The three of them were walking side by side through the streets of the capital. Tomochika was in the middle, pulling her large suitcase behind her. Yogiri was on her right while David was to her left. The guard was rambling about something or another while Tomochika made the bare minimum of effort to show that she was listening. Yogiri must not have cared either way, since he was flat out ignoring the entire conversation.

“Did you say something?” asked David.

“No, just do your best with your training,” Tomochika replied vaguely, staring determinedly forward.

The city streets ahead of her had a tasteful, historied look to them. There were many stone buildings, but they didn’t seem to have the same magic as the city walls. High Wizard Eglacia had been active around a thousand years ago, so that was when the city had first been built. Considering buildings were generally worn away and replaced over time, it was hard to believe that any of the original structures had survived.

In front of them stood the largest building in the city: the royal palace. That was where they were headed and where they expected to find their classmates, who had been granted an audience with the king for that very day.

The palace was in the middle of the capital, its majestic form visible from anywhere within the city walls, so at first glance, it didn’t seem like they would need a guide to get there. But perhaps there hadn’t been much in the way of city planning, as the labyrinthine layout of the streets made a guide

quite necessary.

"I've been wondering for a while, but aren't there an awful lot of people with weapons around here?" Tomochika asked. It was hard for her to believe all the people around them were ordinary civilians, given how many of them wore armor and had swords, spears, and bows strapped to their bodies. There were far too many of them to be city guards, and they were all equipped differently anyway.

"Those are Explorers, warriors who seek to challenge the Underworld. That's why the capital was built in the first place, after all."

"Excuse me?" Tomochika was thrown off by his reply. The word "underworld" seemed so out of place it had caught her off guard.

"What do you mean, 'Underworld'?" Yogiri asked, seeing that Tomochika was too surprised to ask the question herself.

"The Underworld is the territory of the Dark God, which exists below the capital. To put it simply, the Dark God is sealed beneath the city, so its spawn regularly show up down there. Those who patrol the area and dispatch the evil creatures they find are called Explorers."

"Wait, the Dark God in the canyon wasn't the only one left?! Exactly how many of these things *are* there?!"

Yogiri had recently killed the Dark God that the Swordmaster watched over, and it had never occurred to either of them that there might still be others around.

"In the canyon? I'm not sure about that, but as Knights of the Divine King, you would know more than me." As if his suspicions had been rekindled, David narrowed his eyes at them.

"We know that we're supposed to fight the Dark God's spawn, but we don't know much about where they are or how many of them exist," Yogiri responded naturally. Remaining completely unfazed in such situations was one of his greatest strengths.

"Even the Knights are in the dark, are they? Well, the Dark Gods are an internal threat, so aside from those whose job it is to deal with them, there are relatively few who know they exist. I suppose a city like this, where the Dark God's presence is common knowledge, is an outlier."

"So, it's just a straight line from here, right? Thanks for guiding us, but we should be fine the rest of the way," Yogiri said, changing the subject. He felt that if the conversation proceeded any further, they'd only make the vice-

captain more suspicious.

"Very well. I suppose there is little reason for me to accompany you straight to the door," the guard answered, turning and leaving without complaint.

"Don't you think that was a little cold after he guided us this far?" Tomochika asked.

"If he was still around, it would be hard to talk about this."

"About what?"

"Come on, you know we're going to meet up with our class, right?" Yogiri said with a trace of exasperation.

"Oh, right. They'll probably ask us how we got away from the dragon and made it this far on our own. We'll have to think of an explanation."

"There's that too, but the first question is whether you're even going to forgive them."

"Oh!" The moment Yogiri reminded her, Tomochika felt herself begin to burn with anger towards her classmates.

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Settled within a luxury hotel that had a clear view of the castle, the duo sat across from each other in one of the building's meeting rooms. It would be a pain to carry their luggage around with them everywhere, and they had some things to discuss before reuniting with their class anyway.

"If we're planning to kill them all, then there's no point in making up an excuse about the dragon, is there?" Yogiri asked as soon as they sat down.

"Wow, starting off awfully dark, aren't we? What are you, a total sociopath?" Tomochika was taken aback by the harshness of Yogiri's suggestion. She had thought he would generally only kill those who posed a direct threat, but maybe that wasn't the case.

"They left us alone in a place where we were guaranteed to die. I think we have the right to take revenge. They tried to have us killed, so no one could complain if we do the same, could they?"

The class had done what they'd deemed necessary to ensure the majority of them survived. It was hardly an acceptable excuse to Tomochika, but she and Yogiri had made it just fine in the end, and it didn't feel like they had suffered too much along the way. Tomochika wasn't angry enough to want

such an extreme form of revenge.

"Well, as long as you decide beforehand, it's fine," Yogiri said. "Uncertainty would be a problem. If you haven't made up your mind by the time we see them, we won't be able to act one way or another."

"What about you? You're not mad at them?"

"I don't really care. I was never close with any of them, so it doesn't feel like a betrayal to me. Even if they hadn't decided based on who had the Gift and who didn't, I feel like I would have been one of the sacrifices either way."

"Well...yeah, I guess day-to-day relationships are pretty important," Tomochika murmured. "So, if we're not killing them, we need an explanation for how we got here, right?"

"Right. First, about our powers. We can't use the rings to pretend that we're able to do something we can't really do."

I have made considerable progress in analyzing those rings, Mokomoko interjected. *I believe I should be able to modify the settings for your disguise.*

"Well, you already have a special power, so I feel like you'll be able to manage."

"If I tell them I can kill anything I want to, I doubt they'll believe me. And it would almost be a bigger problem if they did. Maybe I can pretend my power is a lot more limited." For example, he could say that his class was "Insect Hunter," and his ability allowed him to kill any insects. That would be suitably unthreatening, and if they asked him to prove it, he could kill whatever bugs were nearby.

"So, what about me? The only special ability I have is this annoying guardian spirit that follows me around."

You really have no respect for your ancestors at all, do you?!

"How about something like the ability to control spirits?" Yogiri suggested. It wasn't *technically* a lie.

I could attack other spirits and exorcise them, Mokomoko offered, *but it would be awfully challenging to show that to others.*

"Yeah, it doesn't help if they can't see you."

In that case, I have an excellent idea! It will take some time to prepare, but consider the problem solved!

"What? We don't have that kind of time right now," Tomochika replied. The audience with the king might have already started. They couldn't

casually wait around for the spirit's solution.

I may appear to be taking this lightly, but I am actually performing multiple complex calculations in the background. It will only take a short while longer!

"At worst, you could say you're a swordsman with a strange fighting style," Yogiri suggested, voicing the first option that came to mind.

"That's basically the same as saying I don't have any powers at all."

In the end, despite how uneasy it made her, she decided to put her faith in Mokomoko.

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Chapter 7 — What Happened to Make Him So Rude?!

Ayaka Shinozaki made her way to the village she had seen on the Dragon Plains while surveilling the area from a hilltop near the ruined bus. After discussing the situation with the various units in her head, she'd decided that heading to the same place as her classmates was a bad idea.

Ayaka may not have been an ordinary human, but she was only a few times stronger than one. Her classmates, however, had acquired bizarre new powers. In order to exact her revenge, she would need to do some research first.

This is the Mental Health Unit. The Personality Unit is displaying an abnormal state of mind. Immediate treatment is recommended.

Yet another new unit had appeared.

"Why? Because I said I was going to kill them all?"

Correct. Such an objective should not be placed at a higher priority than our own survival. What would we accomplish by doing such a thing at this point? We should be focusing our efforts on staying alive and returning home.

"We can do that once they're all gone." Ayaka couldn't think of anything but revenge against those who had left her for dead. She didn't care about returning home or ensuring her own survival in this place.

As the Project Execution Unit, I am opposed to the Mental Health Unit's assessment. After suffering through an unreasonable ordeal, she has sworn to take revenge. Is this not a perfectly ordinary example of human behavior? Your "treatment" would be to erase her memory, I assume?

Correct. The dangers of an obsession with suffering or having her mind dominated by thoughts of vengeance cannot be overlooked.

Yet erasing her memories and replacing them with something new isn't an acceptable solution. It isn't something that real humans can do.

Ayaka, being far from ordinary, wasn't too thrilled with the other units'

fixation on trying to make her "more human." However, she did agree that wiping her memory was unacceptable. If she allowed that to happen, her identity as the Personality Unit would be erased.

Project Execution Unit, opposed.

Mental Health Unit, in favor.

Diagnostic Unit, opposed.

Medical Unit, opposed.

Battle Unit, opposed.

"Personality Unit, opposed."

This is the Judgment Unit. Due to a majority opposition, the proposal has been rejected.

Really, it was all just her talking to herself. While that was going on, Ayaka had arrived at the village.

With the settlement standing before her, she began to have her doubts. The small community was surrounded by a wall, but it was only a thin, fragile-looking wooden structure. It didn't seem particularly useful as it only came up to her waist. It looked pretty careless for a place where dragons were known to roam.

Certainly, the city to the north was far better defended, with proper walls and cannons.

There wasn't anything special at the entrance, so Ayaka made her way inside. The villagers were running around in a panic, gathering their possessions outside their homes.

"Are they trying to 'sneak out under the cover of darkness'?"

I don't know about that, as it is the middle of the day, one of the other units offered, *but it definitely looks like they're intending to flee somewhere.*

The villagers finally noticed Ayaka as they loaded up their carts. For a moment, they seemed scared, but perhaps because she looked like nothing more than a young girl, they quickly went back to piling up their belongings.

Ayaka approached the villagers and started to call out to them, "Hey, can I ask you a — actually, what would I even ask?"

She had come there in search of information, but hadn't thought far enough ahead to figure out how to actually obtain it. Then again, there was a noticeable problem well before worrying about what to ask. Despite the locals muttering back at her, she had absolutely no idea what they were saying. And it was quite clear that they wanted nothing to do with her; they

made an obvious show of avoiding eye contact and going firmly about their business.

This is where the Translation Unit should show up, right?

Don't be absurd! How could I possibly translate a language from another world without any clues?

She was hardly in a position to start gathering information. As she mulled over what to do, yet another unit made its appearance.

This is the Analysis Unit. It seems you are concerned about the language barrier, but thanks to the ongoing digestion of the dragon's brain, I have managed to extract some fundamental linguistic information. It may prove useful in understanding the languages of this world.

"Hey, maybe it's weird to ask this so long after I ate it and all...but where exactly did that dragon go?" Ayaka asked, rubbing her stomach. She felt quite full, and her stomach had puffed out a little, but it was impossible for her to believe that a dragon bigger than the bus she had come in on was somehow crammed into her gut. She had been too desperate while eating to pay such things any mind, but now that she thought it over, it seemed rather unlikely.

It is currently contained in our subspace pocket. I am the Subspace Management Unit, by the way.

"What does that even mean?"

Think of it like the pocket of that cat-type robot. Our true body is also within that space.

"True body?"

Correct. Our current body is intended to imitate that of a human, with the intention of creating an artificial form. However, we were unsuccessful in recreating an organ with the power of the human brain in such a compact space. As such, an enormous processor has been placed within a subspace pocket, allowing us to simulate human thought processes.

"Your technology seems awfully lopsided," Ayaka remarked. Despite being able to use and manipulate things like subspace pockets, they found the task of replicating human intelligence rather difficult.

The creation of artificial humans is still a developing field, after all.

"Well, okay. So can I use that to store stuff, then?"

No, please consider it a space that you cannot retrieve items from. You may imagine it as akin to having an enormous stomach.

Excuse me! I have determined how to use the language that the dragon understood. I'll handle all of the translating, so please speak as you normally would!

"All right, let's start by asking someone what's going on," Ayaka murmured, turning to a nearby villager. "You all seem to be worried about something. What's wrong?"

But all that she heard in reply remained meaningless noise.

Seems like it won't work. Their linguistic structure is too different from the dragon's.

"Well, it *was* a dragon..."

The fact that the beast would speak a different language from humans was fairly predictable. The villager, however, looked startled. A moment before, he had been treating her with suspicion and hostility, but now his attitude had suddenly changed. Dropping everything in his arms, he ran off into the gathering crowd.

Hmm. It appears they are afraid of us.

Ayaka stood there for a moment, taken aback, before the villager who had fled returned with an old man.

"Ex-cuse me, true you speak dragon words?" the gentleman asked falteringly.

"Hey, this is a translation, right? Can't you just translate it normally?"

I suppose. I did find the grammar a bit strange, but I'll simply translate the meaning directly.

"Yes, this is the only language I can speak," Ayaka replied. "But who are you?"

"I am the chief of this village, and a dragon priest," he said, almost reverently.

"The others can't speak the dragon's language?"

"No, it is only passed down to the priests."

If this individual can speak both the dragon's and the humans' languages, we can use that as a clue to learn the local language ourselves, noted the Analysis Unit.

"Things seem pretty chaotic around here. What's happening?"

According to the priest, their village was on the verge of being attacked. There were numerous settlements on the Dragon Plains, each protected by the great dragon. That protection came primarily from the worshiping of the

dragon in this particular village.

The only person able to communicate with their protector was the dragon priest, who passed on his secrets to a single successor in each generation. In this land, the power of the dragon was absolute, and losing its protection was as good as dying. As such, this village had tremendous authority throughout the region and essentially ruled over the other settlements.

"And that protection has disappeared?"

"Yes, the dragon's presence suddenly vanished. The other villages have risen up in revolt against us, but...all we do here is pray. We have no means of defending ourselves."

If a rebellion had already started, the village must have had quite an oppressive reign over the area. But Ayaka didn't care much about the plight of the locals.

Won't we be able to solve the language problem if we simply eat this man?

"I said I won't eat humans, remember? Why don't we just bring this guy with us and learn from him normally?"

"Um, who exactly are you?" the village chief asked, staring at Ayaka as she lapsed back into Japanese.

Step to the right!

At the sudden command from the Battle Unit, Ayaka complied, narrowly dodging an incoming arrow. Thanks to her quick response, the arrow embedded itself in another villager's head instead.

Watching the villager fall to the ground from the corner of her eye, Ayaka turned to search for the source of the arrow. A group of mounted soldiers was charging towards them, weapons drawn.

"This village is kind of unpopular, isn't it?"

We can't dodge the next attack! Cover your head!

Ayaka was doubting her eyes. One of the soldiers had fired a single arrow. As it flew, it split again and again, becoming a hailstorm of sharp projectiles.

"There's no way to survive that, right?"

It was like a wall coming straight for her. Escaping it would be impossible, and even if she tried to defend herself, she'd take a number of fatal injuries.

This is the Dragon Language Unit. Please say "Dragon Scale" out loud!

"What, are you a *new* Unit?"

Yes! I am a subunit of the Battle Unit, created as a result of analyzing the dragon. Now please, quickly!

"Dragon Scale?" Ayaka did as she was told. Mere seconds after she spoke the words, the rain of arrows struck, bouncing off the air just in front of her and shattering, leaving her entirely unharmed.

"Oh, ohhhh, th-this is the dragon's...!" The village chief had at some point crouched down behind Ayaka. It was rather bold of him to use her as a shield like that.

"What was that?" Ayaka asked.

Dragons in this world possess special magical abilities, operated through their native tongue. In short, whether or not a dragon's ability to be resilient, fly, or breathe fire stems from a kind of magic that we don't fully understand, we can tap into that power directly through the creature's language even without knowing precisely how it works.

"I don't understand the details, but basically, I can use the dragon's abilities now, right? Is there anything else I can do?"

Yes, there are other options, like Dragon Claw, Dragon Wing, and Dragon Breath.

"Kind of skimped on the naming scheme, didn't you?"

In reality, they require rather complicated incantations, but upon translation they can be summarized more simplistically.

"'Breath' means it's going to come from my mouth, right?"

No, the abilities have been conceptually simplified as well, so you can fire from anywhere.

"I see." Ayaka stretched out a hand, facing her palm toward the approaching cavalry. With Dragon Scale, she would probably now be impervious to anything they could throw at her. But the fact remained, they had tried to kill her. That wasn't something she was willing to forgive.

"Dragon Breath."

With those two words, the grassland before her was set ablaze.

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Everything within Ayaka's line of sight was incinerated. Not a shred of the approaching soldiers remained.

"Nice. If I can do that, I can probably deal with my classmates easily, right?" Despite the act of mass slaughter she had just perpetrated, Ayaka was deathly calm.

Try not to let it go to your head.

"I guess I'll start by learning the language from this old man...uh, what?" As Ayaka turned around, she saw that the surviving villagers had all prostrated themselves before her.

It seems they will answer any of our requests after that demonstration. We should make whatever use of them we can.

"Well, if they plan on doing as I say, I won't treat them badly."

Ayaka found their reverence for her only natural.

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The moment Yogiri and Tomochika arrived at the palace, they were immediately shown to the audience chamber. Apparently, word had preceded them.

Within the chamber, they found their classmates already seated in chairs that had been lined up for them.

"Kind of reminds me of an entrance ceremony," Tomochika whispered.

"Were there really so few people with us?"

Yogiri knew a number of the students had already died, but even taking that into account, there didn't seem to be nearly enough of their former classmates present. He could probably figure out the class's original structure by asking Tomochika, but now wasn't the time for that.

The two snuck in, taking a seat in the empty back row. Announcing their arrival to everyone right now would create unnecessary confusion. Luckily, no one had noticed them enter.

As they sat down, a large man appeared from the opposite end of the room. He seemed to be in his prime, wearing a sword at his side. His well-defined body was noticeable even beneath the luxurious clothing. The sword he carried was likely not for decoration.

Seating himself on a slightly elevated throne, he looked down at the Sage candidates. There was no doubt that this was the king of Manii.

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So, this is what people who hold authority are like in this world, Yogiri thought. The king could probably stand on the front lines and fight without issue. It was an entirely different image of powerful individuals than Yogiri had held up until that point. Then again, his only experience with heads of state so far had been the ones cowering in fear once they learned of his ability, so perhaps his perspective was skewed.

"I have heard your story. Congratulations on making it here after such a long journey," the king said, not bothering to hide how much of a hassle this obviously was for him. "Well, this is part of the job, I suppose. Per my contract with the Sages, there's nothing I can do about it. As Sage candidates, you've come here to accomplish feats of renown. In this country, there are two such feats you could likely accomplish —"

"Hey, hey, what are you talking all high and mighty for?" one of the members of the class interrupted, standing up. "We're not your citizens. We're from another world. Whether you're a king or whatever doesn't mean anything to us."

"Who's the idiot?" Yogiri asked. The boy looked familiar, but he couldn't recall his name.

"Shinya Ushio...but was he always so bad at reading the room?" Tomochika answered. There was no way this type of attitude was acceptable for an audience with a ruler of a country.

None of their other classmates seemed the least bit worried, though. While they didn't appear to be happy with his behavior, their disdain seemed to stem more from being tired of his antics than anything else.

"Oh? I had thought to show you some consideration since you were Sage candidates. I even prepared chairs for all of you. Normally, you would have to kneel before me, you know that?"

"And what makes you think you can just sit up there and look down on us? Who do you think you are?" Ushio challenged, walking unreservedly up to the throne.

As he did, the king got to his feet and stepped off the platform. "I believe I'm the king, actually. Well, you've amused me, so I'll come down to your level. Does that satisfy you?"

The monarch's tone was one of an adult speaking to a small and petulant child. While Ushio was tall for his age, the king still stood a full head above him. Combined with his large frame, his sheer presence dwarfed that of

Ushio.

“What on earth happened to make him so rude?!” Tomochika wondered, mirroring Yogiri’s thoughts perfectly. Even though they were in another world, this was still the head of a royal family, the king of an independent country. That alone deserved the utmost respect, but it seemed Ushio was too far gone to understand or care about etiquette.

“You have something to tell us, right? I’m sure you’re busy too, so get on with it.”

“Ahahaha!” the king roared with laughter, wholly unbothered by the upstart student’s attitude. “This is the first time I’ve had someone act this way towards me! How refreshing!”

“What? Is he really going to let that slide? I’m worried for the country if so,” Tomochika muttered, flabbergasted. She must have felt that Ushio’s attitude was unforgivable.

“I suppose you thought that would be my response, didn’t you?” the king said suddenly, drawing his sword. An instant later, he had separated Ushio from four of his fingers.

Yogiri hadn’t even seen it happening. It was too fast for him to catch, but it was easy enough to piece together that Ushio had tried to block the sword with his bare hand and lost his fingers in the process. There was a reason most people wouldn’t think to defend themselves that way.

Ushio stared blankly at the missing fingers for a long moment before the reality of the situation caught up with him. With a scream, he sank to the floor, curling up around his injured hand.

At the sight of it, the rest of the Sage candidates finally began to panic.

“Wait, how?! How did he beat the Eroge Baron’s time-freeze ability?!”

“S-Somebody help him!”

“What’s going on?! Goddammit! I can’t use any of my skills!”

“Me neither!”

The king stared down at Ushio with cold eyes, but it appeared he had no intention of finishing him off. Satisfied, he nonchalantly returned to his throne.

“What the hell does Eroge Baron mean?” Tomochika mused in the midst of the commotion.

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Chapter 8 — You Don’t Think You Might Have Already Done That, Do You?

“It looks like I read you guys fairly well. Don’t worry, no matter how rude you are, I have no intention of killing you. You should be prepared to lose an arm or two, though.”

The students were clearly in shock, the room rapidly devolving into a state of total chaos. It must have been a powerful blow to them, having relied so much on the Gift until now.

Sitting on his throne, the king smirked at the uproar, but when things failed to settle down, he quickly lost his patience.

“All right, can you shut up now? Or should I do two or three more of you?”

The students immediately fell quiet. Aside from Yogiri and Tomochika, the entire group was clearly on edge.

“Ugh, at this rate you won’t remember anything I say anyway. Fine, I’ll explain a little before we get to the main topic. Making sure you understand your situation is part of the contract, after all.”

He must have felt there was no point in talking about the upcoming feats yet. With a sigh, he began to explain.

“Although the Sages act like they rule over this world, we aren’t their subjects here. So we don’t have their support, or anything that lets us put restrictions on the Gift. You know that much, right?”

Yogiri remembered hearing that the Gift was restricted within the cities. But that must have only applied to locations where the Sages’ own subordinates were in control.

“Of course. We’ve already confirmed that our Gifts work within the capital.” Suguru Yazaki, who held the class of General, had spoken up for the group. Unsurprisingly, Yogiri had to ask Tomochika what his name was.

“I thought you might have. If you knew you couldn’t use your powers, you wouldn’t have behaved so badly, am I right? The reason you can’t use

your abilities right now is simple...I possess a power of my own which weakens the Gift. That power extends throughout the entire capital, but as you get closer to me, it becomes stronger. So relax, it's not like your skills are gone forever. Once you are farther away from me, I'm sure you'll be able to reattach his fingers."

Once the students understood that the restrictions on the Gift were a localized phenomenon, they managed to recover some semblance of calm.

"That should be enough for now. If you want to know why or how much your powers have been weakened, ask someone else. Now, on to the main topic. Listen carefully; I don't have time to explain this to you over and over."

The candidates did as they were told, giving the king their full attention.

"In order for you to become Sages, you must accomplish great feats. In this kingdom, there are two such feats for you to attempt. The first is to repel a potential invasion by the Argandan Empire."

At that, the group began to stir again. If their opponent was an entire country, was their training so far worth anything at all? It was natural that they would be uneasy.

"Uhh, I don't know why this thought occurred to me...and it's only the vaguest of vague hunches, but against all odds...you don't think you might've already done that, do you, Takatou?" Tomochika murmured.

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Turning back the clock a little, we return to the ruins of the Swordmaster's tower shortly after Yogiri and Tomochika left.

"At this rate, I'll have to just take a dump in front of you fully nude!"

"What the hell are you talking about?!"

A teenage boy was wailing prostrate on the ground, while a child stared down at him.

The one crying was Daimon Hanakawa. He was a Japanese high school student who had been summoned to this world by the Sages.

The other was a spawn of the Dark God Albagarma, the last of his kind, named Lute. The rest of the spawn had been wiped out, leaving him the sole survivor, but he didn't fully understand what had happened there. So he was currently trying to extract that information from the last person left at the

scene.

“But that’s it for me! Logically speaking, rationally speaking, there is nothing I can do to survive this situation! You’re just going to kill me after I answer your questions anyway, right?! There’s no way I could even run from you, let alone fight! Even though you look like an innocent child, you’re actually a merciless, cruel killer who would destroy me like an insect and say something like, ‘Wow, how strange! I didn’t think he’d die from *that*,’ aren’t you?!” Hanakawa howled pathetically.

Lute had hoped to use him as a source of intel in order to avenge his master, but at this rate, he wouldn’t get anything of value. “So why were you pressing your face into the ground like you were willing to do whatever it took to survive earlier?”

“Oh, did you see that?”

“Of course I did.”

“Well...I can’t really argue with your interpretation of that, but I had no idea what to do at the time,” Hanakawa admitted awkwardly. “The only thing I can do now is strip down and remain defiant!”

“Why, though?!” Hanakawa began to take off his clothes. “Seriously, don’t!”

“Oh, are you telling me to take an epic shit with my clothes on? I see, you’re more interested in watching people do that sort of thing clothed!”

“I’m going to say this just in case, but you better not. I’ll kill you instantly.”

From Lute’s perspective, Hanakawa was simply trash. The difference in their strengths was so great, there was nothing the otherworlder could do to so much as scratch him. But even to a spawn of the Dark God, disgusting things were...well, disgusting, and he was as confused as the average human would be by Hanakawa’s nonsensical behavior.

“Fine, I promise not to kill you out of spite, so relax.” As reluctant as he was, Lute tried to get the teen to see reason.

“Truly? But will you not just kill me anyway while saying that?”

“No. There’s no one left to provide this information but you, so I can’t afford to.”

“Really, now? Are you not the type of evil child who will forget your promise the moment you grow a little angry? You aren’t impulsively going to kill your only source of information without thinking about what to do next? I

feel like you might do it just to make yourself seem less ordinary!"

"All right, fine, then I'll kill you."

"I'm sorry! As soon as I saw I had a chance to live, I let it go to my head!" Hanakawa pressed his forehead harder into the ground.

"So, you said earlier that there's a guy who can kill people just by thinking it. That's pretty hard to believe in and of itself, nevermind that he could kill my lord as well."

"Yes, but...!"

"Yeah, I get it. I know that at the very least you believe it to be true. Putting the details aside for now, I recognize that this Takatou is likely related to what happened here. Of course I plan on killing everyone who was present, just in case, but I should probably kill him first."

"Umm, that's fine and all, but the issue is how you plan on doing it. If Master Lute could kill Takatou, it would be like a dream come true, and I'd be able to sleep peacefully at night again! And if I could have Tomochika for myself, that would be even better!"

"If this Instant Death ability of his is some sort of fake, I have to assume that I'm fighting someone with enough raw strength to kill my lord. In that case, there's no way I could win."

"So what will you do?"

"It's easy. I just need to get help from someone who's even stronger than my lord was." As he spoke, Lute pulled something from his pocket. It was a golden tube that had been warped and twisted into an intricate shape.

"What is that?"

"I took it from my lord's body. It's the key to a seal."

"The word 'seal' gives me a bad feeling about this. You plan on setting something free?"

"My lord was the older brother of a pair of gods, meaning he has a little sister. He wasn't willing to put up with her insolent behavior, so he ended up catching her off guard and locking her away."

"But if she was weak enough to be locked up by the Dark God, wouldn't that make her weaker than him?"

"She is a completely overpowered being, but she had a weakness for my lord alone. She would do anything that he said."

"Ahaha, I see. So he deceived her. But once that seal is broken, won't she be mad with rage? Well, if there is someone like that out there, I will leave it

up to her and bid you adieu!”

With those words, Hanakawa began to scurry away, still on his knees and bowing low to the ground, but Lute stepped over and grabbed the high schooler’s hair to foil his escape.

“And just where are you going?”

“I’ve told you everything I know now, so if you aren’t planning to kill me, I thought it best to get well out of your way! I feel it is preferable for garbage like me to ensure that I never curse your eyes with my hideous visage ever again!”

“Whatever. I don’t know anything about this Takatou guy, so I’m going to have to ask you to come with me.”

“Err, well, my mother said I shouldn’t follow strangers. And won’t it be embarrassing for you if we’re seen together? People might start spreading rumors!”

“Ahahaha, a stranger? Don’t be so cold. We’re friends, right?” Pulling Hanakawa up by his hair, he forced him to meet his eyes.

“Noooooo! Please, spare me! Being pulled around in order to revive someone who is even stronger than the Dark God is beyond my capabilities! Seriously, why does this always happen to me?! After being used like a tool by that tomboy, now it’s a kid?! I have no interest in such people! At least give me someone who wears women’s clothes! Even if they’re a cross-dresser, at least I’d be able to accept it a little easier!” Hanakawa wailed desperately. The fact that Lute was a powerful being he could never hope to match had apparently slipped his mind.

“You want a woman? I don’t really care what I look like, so sure.”

Lute had no desire whatsoever to strive to meet Hanakawa’s needs, but changing his appearance was easier than breathing. So he did, following his own whims, taking on the appearance of a village girl he had seen in the past.

“Oh! Ohhhh! That’s much better than the tomboy! Just seeing you in that form makes me think it’s okay to go along with you!” Hanakawa’s eyes were sparkling. He had already forgotten the perilous situation he was in.

“Well, since I don’t need to reproduce like humans, I don’t really have a gender.”

“Hm? So...what does that mean? You have both parts?”

“Why would I have either?”

Hanakawa suddenly slammed a hand onto the ground, hard enough to

make the dirt shake. Startled, Lute let go of his hair.

"That is incorrect!" Hanakawa roared.

"Uh, are you crying?" Lute was confounded by Hanakawa's uncharacteristic display of vigor.

"Genderless is the absolute worst! What's the point of a 'dick girl' without a dick?!"

"You said as long as I *looked* like a woman, you'd be happy, right?" Lute couldn't figure out what the hell this whiny human wanted.

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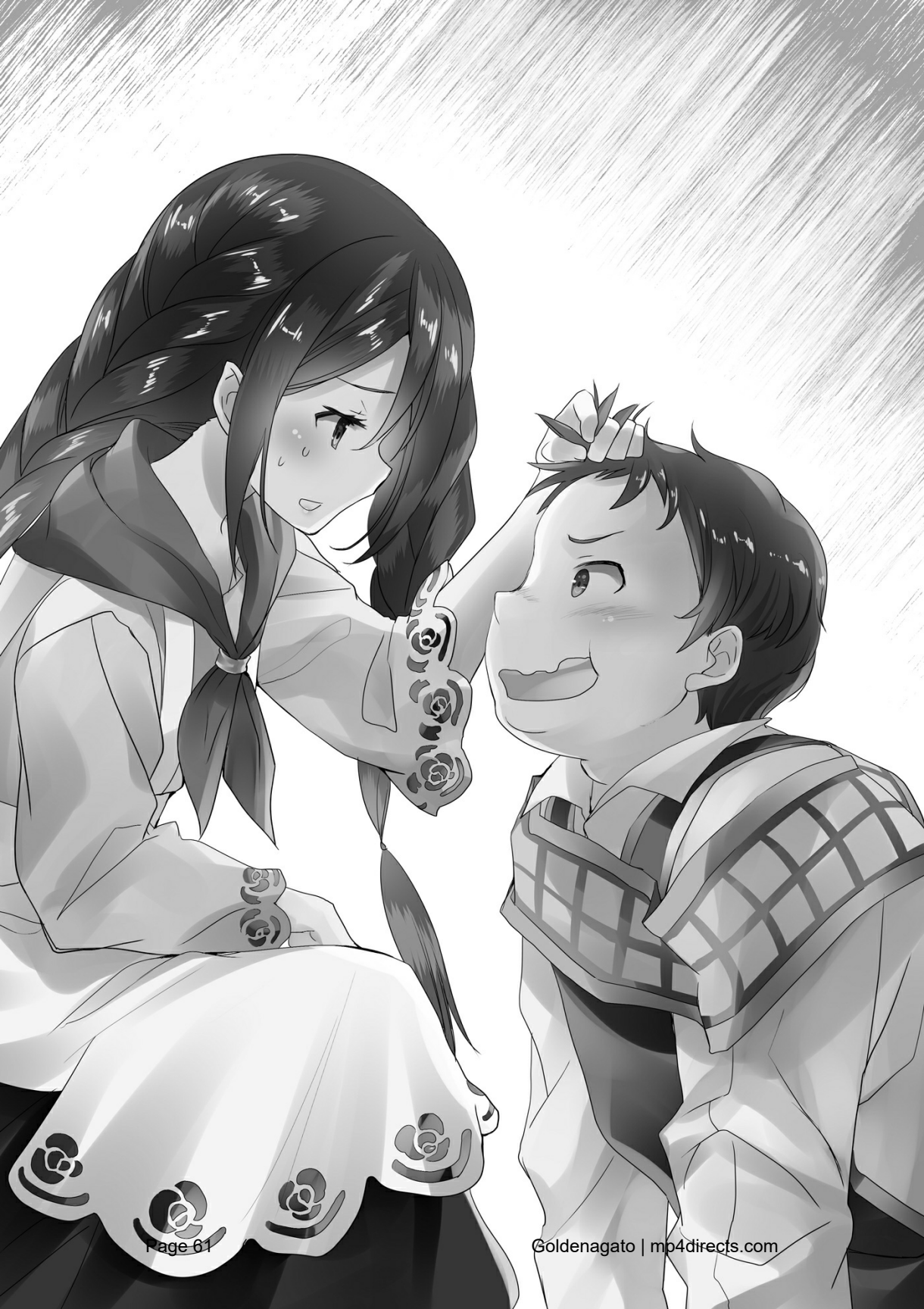

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Chapter 9 — Is This What It Means for the Laws of the Universe to Be in Chaos?

Back in the capital of the Kingdom of Manii, in the audience chamber of the royal palace:

“To be frank, we aren’t sure of the scope of the Argandan Empire,” the king began, as he launched into his explanation of the first of the great feats available to them. The Sage candidates before him were listening very carefully. Yogiri and Tomochika, having arrived late, were still sitting in the back and had yet to be noticed.

“To the west is a league of nations known as the Erchia Republican Commonwealth. One of their members recently declared independence, calling themselves the Empire of Arganda, and began attacking their neighboring countries. It didn’t take long for them to conquer the rest of the Commonwealth. Even now, they are continuing to expand their military activities. Considering they are as yet undefeated, we feel it may only be a matter of time before they show up on our borders. If they do, and if you can repel their advance somehow, I will recognize it as a great deed before the Sages.”

“B-but how on earth...” someone in the class murmured. There was only so much a single group of high school students could do, even with the Gift.

“Oh, don’t worry, I have absolutely no hope that you lot will succeed. But a great feat has to be something that seems impossible, no? If we knew a way to defeat them ourselves, we would have done it long ago. Then again, we don’t know that they’ll attack us in the first place, so there’s always a chance they might not.”

“But you asked us to stop their invasion, right?” Yazaki asked.

“If you’ve traveled this far, you should know by now that our kingdom doesn’t have much in the way of usable land. There’s not much to be gained by invading us, so nothing is certain.”

Yogiri thought back to the map of the country he had seen. The Dragon

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Plains, the Forest of Beasts, the Haqua Forest, the Garula Canyon, the Meld Plains...none of them seemed like places suited to human life, nor like regions where any sort of development could realistically occur.

"But the city of Hanabusa is flourishing, right? Wouldn't that alone be valuable enough?"

"A place where the Sages are heavily involved doesn't count. Even *I* can't do anything about that city. I think the Argandans would know that. It may be a useful hint for you, so I guess I'll tell you how meaningless it is to invade us.

"One reason is, like I said, there's not much potential for material gain. Having control of the territory doesn't offer a lot to an invading nation. The other issue is the Underworld beneath us needing to be kept in check. With no special industry of our own, we've barely been able to manage it with the support of the surrounding kingdoms, but keeping the Dark God locked away is extremely taxing.

"In short, invading us has a good probability of leading to the Dark God's resurrection, which doesn't help anybody. That's why there's always been a sort of unwritten rule to leave us in peace."

When they heard the word "underworld," the candidates began to mutter amongst themselves. Yogiri and Tomochika had been told about it already, but it was obviously the first time the others were hearing about it.

"And doesn't that make the perfect segue? For the second feat, you'll need to go underground, travel through the Underworld, and defeat the Dark God. Not that I think it's something you can do so soon after arriving here. As far as difficulty goes, I can't say it's much easier than facing off against the Empire. At least with the Argandans, you're fighting humans, even if it's an entire country. The Dark God, however, is a monster that transcends human understanding, and even after more than a thousand years, we've got no idea how to defeat it.

"And that's about as much as I have to say to you. Do whatever you like. I've sectioned off part of the palace for you, so feel free to use it as your base. The entrance to the Underworld is beneath the palace, so if you plan on going that route, it should be quite convenient for you."

As if to confirm that his work there was done, the king stood from his throne and left the room. Shortly after, a soldier arrived in his stead and nodded to the class.

“Please follow me.”

He was no doubt there to guide them to their new headquarters. Still in a state of shock, the candidates got to their feet.

“So, what do we do now?” Yogiri asked.

“Well, I don’t think we can get out of here unnoticed, even if we try to sneak along behind them, so...uhh, HEY!” Tomochika shouted, prompting the others to turn around.

“Dannoura?! What...?!”

“Dannoura! How did you get here?!”

“Tomochii! You’re alive!”

“Tomo!”

“Dannoura?!”

The moment they saw the pair, the teens all called out Tomochika’s name in a sudden burst of noise. Although individual reactions were varied, they were all extremely surprised.

“Hey, someone react to Takatou as well!” she snapped.

Their total disinterest in him, however, had been well within Yogiri’s expectations.

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In a forest to the west of the Garula Canyon was a brilliantly colored mosaic. It looked like space had been torn apart and stitched back together in random places, perhaps a perfect representation of the concept of chaos.

There was no sign of life within the rift. No creature would willingly approach such an unnatural place. Yet there was a woman in a white dress standing in front of the bizarrely warped space.

“Is this what it means for the laws of the universe to be in total disarray?”

It was a Sage, Sion. She had come here in response to a signal that she’d received, but had never expected a sight like this.

As she stood watching it dumbly, the scenery before her continued its dizzying movements. Each fragment of the mosaic seemed to bow to different laws, each piece appearing to be from a different universe. The shards of each world were constantly shifting, overwriting one another, merging together and splitting apart.

“Well, I guess it’s in here, then?”

While waiting outside the surreal mosaic, Sion felt some magical energy spill out. As expected of a signal passing through a space this chaotic, there was no sign of its original form by the time it reached her. With so many errors, deciphering the message had been utterly impossible, but she could at least recognize that it was a call for a Sage.

Sion thought again about what this could be. Something with an iron will existed here, refusing passage to all others. It was like an absolute rejection of the outside universe. And yet, Sion stepped into it without concern. All she had to do was forcibly rewrite the laws of physics around her. She transformed the tumultuous patchwork into a space where she could not only live but also be comfortable — a feat possible for any Sage.

Creating her own path, Sion pushed her way forward. Even for her, stitching the world back together like this while she walked was back-breaking work. After progressing for a while, she finally passed through the core of the chaos and into a place that seemed to be its center.

It was a white room, empty of everything. And there was a girl crouched in the corner.

“Well, if it isn’t Aoi. No wonder we didn’t hear back from you.”

Aoi had been charged with the task of hunting Rogue Sages, but all news from her had vanished after she’d been dispatched to handle Yogiri Takatou.

“Sion! So I did manage to get through!” a voice called from Aoi’s hip, where a small knife still sat in its sheath.

“Did something happen?”

Even after Sion’s arrival, Aoi hadn’t lifted her head. She either hadn’t noticed her, was ignoring her, or had completely shut out the outside world.

It didn’t seem like she would get a response from Aoi, so Sion decided to try her luck with the knife instead.

“We met Yogiri Takatou. I don’t know what she saw, but the moment she laid eyes on him, she completely lost the will to fight. She ran away as fast as she could, eventually hiding here.”

The moment she heard Yogiri’s name, a visible shiver ran through Aoi’s body. So, she hadn’t entirely cut herself off after all.

“I see. Well, that may have been unavoidable, so I can’t really blame her.”

Yogiri was already suspected to be responsible for the deaths of two Sages, and after meeting him once, Aoi had ended up in this apparent state of madness. So Sion had little doubt there was something truly different about

the boy after all.

"I guess at this point, I'll have to deal with him myself. Aoi, did you learn anything about him?"

Predictably, Aoi remained silent.

"Allow me to report," said the knife. "I already sent you all the information we have on him. It comes from an individual known as Daimon Hanakawa, who saw the boy's power firsthand and survived. If he's still alive, there may be more you can draw out of him. As a Sage candidate, it should be simple enough to find him, right?"

"Hanakawa...I see. I'll look into him as well."

Sion hadn't bothered to learn the Sage candidates' names. Most of them were going to die anyway, so she hadn't thought it worth the effort. It was rare for someone to survive the required ordeals long enough to become a Sage.

"First, I suppose I should get a grasp on exactly what his ability is. Either way, he is just a high school student. If he has any friends, I could start by taking one hostage. I have full control over the lives and deaths of those who had the Gift installed successfully. Or perhaps I should try to win him over. A boy of that age...seducing him wouldn't be difficult."

Sion was considering all sorts of roundabout methods as she still hadn't ruled out the possibility of making Yogiri into a Sage himself. She had no doubt that in a battle of strength, she'd come out on top every time. She couldn't even comprehend the idea of someone being stronger than her, even among the other Sages. Although she would never say it out loud, she considered herself the most powerful by far.

"Stop..." Aoi said, shakily raising her head. She looked totally worn out. A Sage could survive indefinitely without food or drink, so her state must have been purely the result of mental stress. "Please, stay away from him...don't do anything stupid..."

"Unfortunately, that won't do. I can't just leave him to his own devices."

Sion had summoned Yogiri's class in order to add to their ranks, but they had ended up losing Sages instead. Whether it was to make the boy a fellow Sage or kill him, *something* had to be done.

"This is...this is your fault..."

"Hm?" Sion cocked her head, not quite able to hear what Aoi was saying.

"You! You summoned that *thing*! What the hell have you done?! Do you

have any idea what you've summoned?! It's over! This world is finished! Screw this, goddamnit! If you want to die so badly, go die! Don't drag the whole world...don't drag *me* into it!"

Aoi's sudden outburst took Sion by surprise. It was the first time she had seen Aoi lose her cool like this.

"What are you trying to say?"

"That thing...it isn't human...it's not even...a living being..."

But that was all Aoi could manage. After her short outburst, she sank back into her own world. There was nothing more to be done here. Trying to question her any further would be pointless.

"I'd hoped that if someone else showed up, she would improve, but it appears it's still too early for that. I'm sorry to ask this after making you come all the way here, but could you give her some more time?"

"I suppose so. I'll take my leave for now."

Each Sage was a precious resource. If it was possible to rehabilitate Aoi, that would be the best solution. For now, though, Sion decided to return home.

Wrenching space open to make a path for herself, she made her way back outside. Perhaps she had grown used to it somewhat, but getting out had been a lot easier than getting in.

After she made it out of the rift, Sion checked for signs of the Sage candidates she had recently summoned. As the "parent" Sage who had given them the Gift, she had absolute authority to manage her "children." Locating them was a simple task.

The Gift had successfully been installed on thirty-two individuals on the bus. There were now twenty-eight signals left. She'd been told that Yogiri killed two of the candidates in the Dragon Plains, and the remaining two had either died or were currently somewhere her senses couldn't reach.

Sion made a note of the remaining candidates' present locations. Twenty-four were together, in the capital of the Kingdom of Manii to the northeast of her. No doubt they were attempting to clear the missions she had laid out for them. Three more had broken off to form their own group, and one was acting alone.

From the information she had gained from Aoi's knife, the lone individual was likely Hanakawa. There were traces of backup data from a prior installation, which had been restored when she had first activated the Gift in

him — presumably he had visited this world before — so he was probably the correct target. And at the moment, he was crossing the Meld Plains, heading towards the others in the capital.

"I suppose I should speak with this Hanakawa first," Sion murmured, stepping out of the forest and onto her airship.

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Chapter 10 — What?

A Foundation Eater that had acquired sentience made its way into a Celestial Foundation. The foundation was covered in a solid shell known as a canopy, but for a Foundation Eater who had consumed countless worlds along with their canopies, opening a small hole through which to infiltrate was easy.

There was no reason in particular it had picked this foundation. It had just happened to be the closest option at the time. The Foundation Eater's objective was to observe intelligent life, and as a general rule, all Celestial Foundations housed such life.

The Foundation Eater chose to take the form of the most dominant race on that world, and placed itself in the most populous social class. As such, its aim was to become a human farmer. Compressing the information that made up its being into an embryo, it implanted itself into the womb of a suitable person, creating for itself an ordinary human body. And so it gained the perspective of a human baby.

At that point, the baby was only an avatar of itself. It was something like a probe for observing humanity while its true body remained in the Sea, the void that housed each Celestial Foundation.

The Foundation Eater decided that it would let the child live as an ordinary human. It would not interfere in the slightest. So the avatar of the Foundation Eater managed to live an ordinary life. It worked in the fields since its time as a child, grew up to marry a woman from the village, and began having children of its own. Though they were poor, it was a life full of joy.

As its first real experience with life, the Foundation Eater found it engrossing to observe, but over time it began to grow bored. It may have had a good life as a farmer, but the daily routine consisted of constant repetition with very little change over time.

The turning point came after a poor harvest led into a hard winter. A group of thugs came and occupied the village out of nowhere. No doubt they

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intended to hide there, fleeing from someone or other, but rather than lie low, they lived with wild abandon. Recklessly wasting what precious resources the village had, they laughed as they killed anyone who stood against them. When they finally decided to leave, they abducted the women, burned down the houses, and poisoned the wells.

That was where the Foundation Eater's avatar died, killed alongside its family as its wife was stolen away. And yet the Foundation Eater felt only joy. The sudden tragedy had shocked it out of its boredom. It had grown tired of the sedentary, peaceful life of a farmer. Turning its eyes upon the world at large, it saw that there was a great amount of stimulus left to be experienced.

So the Foundation Eater decided to invest itself further. Still in the process of developing its own personality, it wanted to experience this world to the fullest on its own. So it thought to create a second vessel for itself. The death of its first creation was somewhat irritating, so this time it decided to create a stronger body. And now there would be no meaningless rules to hold it back — it would live its life as normally as it could, but when the time came, it wouldn't hesitate to wield its power to the fullest.

It didn't need to start as a child again, either. Creating a suitable body to serve as its vessel, the Foundation Eater entered the world once more.

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Everything went exactly as it desired. At first, it wreaked destruction and killed everyone in its path, but that was only interesting for a short while. It was effectively like having no enemies at all.

After living that way for some time, it grew bored again. So it next took an interest in ruling over and controlling the lives of others. Ruling was simple. When it revealed its power to the people of the world, they bowed down before him of their own accord. So the Foundation Eater organized its followers into an army.

That was truly entertaining. War became the greatest pleasure it had ever known. Creating an army, conquering cities, and conscripting new soldiers to fight, it wasn't long before it had taken over an entire country. That was not thanks to any talent for warfare that it possessed, though — while it generally allowed its armies to fight on their own, if it seemed they might lose, it would step in and exercise its power like a god.

Establishing the Empire of Arganda, the Foundation Eater set its sights on world domination. That domination consisted entirely of conquering the surrounding countries, but the conquest itself held no particular meaning for it. As far as the Foundation Eater was concerned, it was only doing what it considered to be fun. So its invasion of the inviolate Kingdom of Manii was nothing more than a game. It didn't care that there was a Dark God sealed beneath. Rather, it felt that if the Dark God were revived, more interesting developments would arise.

At first, the Foundation Eater exercised restraint with its miracle-like abilities. They were a last resort, and although it ended up using them rather regularly, its true interest was in watching the people fight, so it eventually turned its mind to military tactics.

The plan that it hatched was to concentrate its forces on the Meld Plains and launch a sudden surprise attack on the capital. The region, also known as the Crystal Plains, was an evil land inhabited by crystal monsters, where everything was transformed into their own crystalline makeup over time. No one would think to hide an entire army there. After all, it was impossible to leave anyone in the territory for any real length of time. The incessant attack of insects would exhaust and overwhelm the intruders, eventually turning the soldiers themselves into crystal. Stationing an army there was absurd, but that was what made it so effective for a surprise attack.

The Foundation Eater became determined to carry out its plan. It was most interested in the fun of executing its own strategies, so it didn't care how many of its people died. First, it would seize the railway passing through the plains. That was the only safe place in the region, the only area habitable by humans. It would then set up an encampment in the center of the plains from which to order its troops.

Everything went smoothly at first, but at some point it lost contact with one of the troops sent to take over the nearby train station. Suspicious, it dispatched another group of soldiers to investigate and soon learned that the first batch had been killed.

This was an ill omen. There was no way the railway staff should have been able to fight back against trained soldiers. Someone else must have been in the area. Logically, it was likely someone from the Kingdom of Manii.

Reports soon came in of a vehicle heading towards the capital. The Foundation Eater decided that it couldn't afford to let them escape. If it did,

its plans would all be for nothing. So it gave its orders: stop them at all costs.

The entire army was mobilized in pursuit of that one vehicle. The creature was confident that they would overtake their enemies in no time. After all, the soldiers of the Argandan Empire were equipped with powerful magical weapons as well as technology that was like science fiction to this world. These had all been developed from the knowledge the Foundation Eater had acquired by devouring other worlds, making each soldier in his army a mighty hero.

But as time went by, good news failed to arrive. Tired of waiting, it used a small amount of its power to investigate the situation directly. The armored vehicle was still in flight, the soldiers of the Argandan Empire still in pursuit. Men riding horses, dragons, and even armored tanks all collided into each other or ran headlong into crystal boulders and trees without ever firing their weapons. It didn't know what was happening, but it was clear that they were terrified.

Don't run away. Kill them at any cost!

The Foundation Eater gave a direct order to its army. At this point, they had already deviated significantly from their normal tactics, but it didn't bring its own power to bear against the fleeing vehicle because it was quite enjoying the fight. If it wanted to simply destroy the Kingdom of Manii, it could do so at any time. Its power as a Foundation Eater would make that an easy task, but doing it so quickly was no fun. It had no intention of losing in the end, of course, but it wanted to keep things exciting to the last.

However, even as it thought that, its soldiers continued to collapse one after another. The dragons and horses that had lost their riders milled about in confusion, the tanks that had lost their drivers crashed and went up in flames, and the bodies continued to pile up.

The Foundation Eater couldn't figure out what was happening. It had no idea why they were all dying, but the army was at the end of its rope. In no time at all, it had lost forty percent of its forces. They had all died following the Foundation Eater's orders loyally until the last, but at this rate they would lose the ability to function as an army.

The Foundation Eater sighed in resignation. Stubbornly refusing to give up on its plan to attack the capital from the Meld Plains, it decided to put an end to the armored vehicle itself. It moved its point of view to the inside of the truck.

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A girl was driving the vehicle with a boy sitting beside her. Seeing that, the Foundation Eater became angry, and immediately began plotting the best way to kill them. Should it incinerate them? Or perhaps manipulate them into killing each other? Or maybe killing them would be too easy, and it would be better to pluck off their arms and legs and drop them, still alive, into the army's latrines.

As it considered this, it abruptly realized that its own death was only ten seconds away.

"What?" Caught completely off guard, it froze in shock, wasting two of its precious remaining seconds.

For a creature like the Foundation Eater, time and space were only a part of its existence. It could freely control the universe around it with its thoughts, and even predicting the future was trivial. But now, it couldn't see anything beyond the next few seconds.

What did "death" even mean? It had an objective grasp of the concept, and had even experienced it after a fashion in its previous body, but it didn't really understand what it meant at its core. The very concept of death being applicable to the Foundation Eater itself was totally beyond its ability to comprehend.

Reviewing the information gathered from the countless worlds it had devoured, it couldn't find a single method by which it might die. And yet it still knew that it was going to. It knew that its existence was coming to an end. It didn't know why it was going to happen or what it really meant, no matter how its thoughts raced trying to solve this new enigma dominating its mind. It couldn't understand anything except that the future was decided.

Five seconds left. There was nothing beyond that point. Time would end after only five more seconds. So the Foundation Eater went backwards. If it was only a matter of seconds, reversing time wasn't especially challenging.

Fifteen seconds now remained. Despite moving backwards ten seconds, nothing had been altered, which was strange. It had recognized that it was going to die ten seconds before it was to happen, so if something had occurred at that moment to bring about its death, returning to a moment before that should have, logically speaking, freed it from that fate. But the approaching end still loomed.

For the first time since its consciousness had first awakened, the Foundation Eater felt fear. Some invisible force had wrapped itself around it,

entirely imperceptible, and it knew no way of freeing itself from it. That absolute absurdity somehow transcended cause and effect. Even going back in time couldn't overturn its fated end.

The Foundation Eater abandoned its human body. Leaving the emperor of Arganda where it sat, it retreated to its original form beyond the Celestial Foundation.

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The Foundation Eater awoke in its true body, floating in the Sea. It was large enough to swallow an entire world whole. It looked like some sort of fish; most of its body was a face, and most of its face was a mouth, expressing its nature as a creature that consumed.

It began to tremble at the enormous power infused in its body. It rapidly recognized that it was no longer a tiny human. Time began to blur, and a feeling of omnipotence took over.

It recognized its own enormity, and how trivially miniscule the humans living on the surface of that Celestial Foundation were. And as it did, anger began to bubble up within it. It had run away like a coward. It couldn't forgive the person who had made it do that. It would simply have to destroy that entire foundation. As if to cover up its own fear, fury surged within its heart.

The Foundation Eater mustered the power it had built up from devouring numerous other worlds. There was no value in even consuming a world like this. It would destroy it utterly, leaving nothing behind.

That decision, at that very moment, removed any possibility of escape for it.

It opened its enormous mouth, large enough to swallow the world in a single bite. In the depths of that cavernous maw, a light began to shine, a brilliant flash of rage that would incinerate everything before it.

Die.

The second it determined that it would unleash that light, it came to its senses. It felt like it had heard something. And it realized...ten seconds had passed since it had first predicted its own death.

In that last moment, the Foundation Eater wished it had never become self-aware.

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While Yogiri and the others were listening to the king, the Empire of Arganda was already no more.

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Chapter 11 — Interlude: I Don’t Remember It Being This Large

The Axis Church was the largest, most powerful religious organization in the world. As the name suggested, its faith revolved around the Axis, or to be more precise, what appeared from there. Also known as the Celestial Pole, it was an enormous pillar that ran through the center of the world. But it is said that ordinary humans cannot see this pillar.

Since only a few can see it, its existence is often doubted, and in a world full of magic and monsters, it would be impossible to gather followers around such a vague concept. But the group had two absolutely confirmed benefits in the real world: healing and exorcism.

As far as healing, they were said to have methods of curing illness that normal doctors couldn’t touch, through miracles handed down to them by the Axis. The reliability of healing magic was rather limited, and therefore it wasn’t especially common.

“Exorcism” referred to their ability to exterminate both monsters and the spawn of the Dark Gods. Using the churches set up in each territory as bases from which to operate, they regularly expelled the monsters present in the regions under their control. They also served to watch over those villages and settlements that the nation itself was unable to protect.

The headquarters of the church existed in the capital of the Kingdom of Manii, where they assisted with the suppression of the Underworld beneath the city. The rank of clergy in the church correlated with the breadth of their responsibility, and their head was the Divine King.

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The Divine King and her retinue reached the capital without incident after parting ways with Yogiri and Tomochika. Journeying through the canyon by carriage, they crossed the Crystal Plains by steam engine. Rick and his

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followers disembarked near the palace, while the remainder of their party continued north.

The Seat of the Divine King was a religious institution based in the capital, which served as the main headquarters of the Axis Church and was the second largest building in the city.

Having reserved the front car of the train for themselves, there were three of them remaining. The Divine King sat at the window seat. A beautiful woman wearing white, dress-like armor, she had a somber air about her. She seemed to always have her guard up, as if she were still on the battlefield.

Sitting across from the Divine King was Lynel. He was somewhat notorious for having bad luck, but thanks to the events at the tower, he had set a new standard for what "bad luck" meant in this world.

Beside Lynel was the girl, Frederica. She had lost everything from her right elbow down as a result of an attack by one of the Dark God's spawn. As the staff resting at her side indicated, she was particularly skilled in magic.

Having passed the trials in the tower, both Lynel and Frederica were now Knights of the Divine King.

"Uhh, are you sure you don't want to go home first?" Lynel asked his companion. "I think your father will be worried..."

Frederica had effectively run away from home in order to join the trial at the tower. One would assume that her family was concerned, but she didn't seem to care.

"Come on, if I showed up at home like this, my father would faint. I can't go back until I get this fixed."

They were heading to the Seat of the Divine King for the purpose of healing her arm. Lynel had no particular need to go there himself, but she had dragged him along with her. Since her arm had been lost through some sort of curse, normal healing had proven insufficient.

"I apologize," the Divine King interjected. "It would have been best if I had learned healing magic myself. But if the curse can be removed, regenerating the limb should be possible."

While one might assume the Divine King could wield the entire power of the Axis Church, in reality, her abilities were heavily geared towards combat.

"No, no, please don't worry about it," Lynel replied. "The fact you allow us to travel with you is more than enough."

"It's nothing. You are Knights now. We are already equals," she said,

likely for Lynel's sake, as he seemed to cower whenever he looked at her.

"By the way, whatever happened to those Apology Stones?" Frederica asked, changing the subject.

"I used them all."

Lynel had lost all of the powers the goddess Vahanato had given to him. He had no more star crystals, and he wouldn't be getting any more of them. His ability to return from death was also likely gone, but he had no way of testing it out.

"Will you be okay? You won't die?"

"Hmm, I don't know. It feels like my bad luck has improved somewhat..." At least, Lynel had a vague sense that that was the case. Since leaving the tower, he hadn't met any particularly horrid fate yet.

"Doesn't that mean you won't be able to go to the Underworld? Aren't you basically worse than an ordinary, powerless person?"

"Huh? Why would I be going there in the first place?!"

As long as they were in the capital, there was nothing for Knights to do but go down to the Underworld. That was why Frederica had wanted to become a Knight. Her father hadn't permitted her to go there. The entrance to the Underworld was heavily restricted, and with her father being an aristocrat wielding some control over distributing entry rights, forcing her way in was impossible. But as a Knight, she could go in and out as she pleased, and that would be true regardless of the nobles in charge.

"Uhh...is it too late for me to give up being a Knight?"

"No matter the circumstances, the fact of the matter is you did pass the trial," the Divine King said. "What the trial serves to test most is the strength of your Fate. It is meant to pick out special, extraordinary individuals. Therefore, that means there is something special about you. The fact that you are powerless now is of no concern. Why don't I bestow the Gift upon you myself?"

"What?! How come he gets special treatment?!" Frederica sulked.

Lynel couldn't blame her for thinking it was unfair, but he also felt it was rude of her to say. It made it seem like she was criticizing the Divine King.

"No, that is originally what it meant to be a Knight. Perhaps things have changed in the past thousand years, but now that I have returned, it shouldn't be a problem."

Originally, a Knight of the Divine King was someone who had received

the Gift directly from the previous Divine King. While, under certain circumstances, the Gift could be passed on to others, it weakened with each successive generation, so it was better to receive it from someone as close to the source as possible. Given how close the Divine King was to the original source of the Gift, no one would object to receiving it from her.

"Do you already possess the Gift, Miss Frederica?"

"Yes. My class is Pyromancer++."

A Pyromancer was a mage who specialized in fire magic. It wasn't a particularly rare class, but the double plus added a special value to it. It meant that she had two fundamental advantages that normal Pyromancers didn't have. Even in cases where the class name wasn't immediately recognizable, the addition of a plus was a sign of incredible power. It generally indicated the ability to do something that ordinary classes couldn't accomplish.

"That seems suitable for you, but a second Gift should be no problem."

"So, I can get it too?"

"I intend to give it to all Knights who ask, but of course that decision is up to you." There was a possibility of demerits arising in the case of some classes. For someone who already had a Gift that functioned well, adding a second version was as likely to be a curse as a blessing. "Steam engines, though. These are truly an impressive invention," she mused. A thousand years ago there were no such machines, nor had the city been developed to such a degree.

The train began to slow as it approached the Seat of the Divine King.

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The Divine King was overwhelmed by the sight of the church's headquarters. It was constructed from numerous black and white cylinders, connecting, intersecting, and overlapping in complicated patterns. Even she herself didn't know the meaning behind that geometrical construction, but it was no doubt an awe-inspiring sight to all who beheld it.

"I don't remember it being so large," she said, standing in front of the mysterious structure her former shrine and home had become. The fact that it was called the Seat of the Divine King bothered her somewhat. "I had thought I was merely returning home, but now I'm glad you two came with me." She couldn't even tell where the entrance was. She would have been

totally lost without a guide.

"Umm, it *has* been a thousand years. Do you think they'll recognize you?" Lynel asked.

"Why wouldn't they? Wait...*will* they?"

It was hard to believe that any follower would fail to recognize her, but now that she considered it, she had indeed been missing for a millennium. It was hard to imagine that anyone would know it was her by her presence alone.

"I'm sorry, but even I didn't realize who you were at first," Lynel admitted, honestly apologetic. It was likely the ordinary followers of the church would have the same lack of recognition.

"Hm, that is understandable. But there is nothing to do but proceed and find out. Where should we go from here?"

"Maybe that way?" he suggested, pointing upwards. "I've heard that's the oldest part of the building, which should be an important place to the church."

"That is indeed my old home. But how can we get there?"

A small, familiar building rested atop the head of the tallest cylinder that made up the church. While its design was inspired by the Axis, comparing it to the rest of the newly built structures made it look fairly sad. In her usual condition, the Divine King could have easily jumped that high, but at this point she had lost most of her power. In order to recover, she would need to rest, and for that she would need to return home, so it seemed there was nothing for it but to walk there.

"There are plenty of entrances, but we might as well use the one for nobility," Frederica suggested before guiding them forward, the others following quietly behind her.

Walking through a well-maintained garden, they arrived at one of the smaller cylinders that likely served as a connector to the other buildings. Seeing monks armed with spears guarding the entrance made the Divine King feel a little more at ease. Their "uniform" of wrapped cloth with small pieces of leather armor to guard their vitals was quite familiar to her.

"If we just said, 'The Divine King is back,' they'd probably think we were idiots, right?" Lynel asked.

"It is the truth, so what else can we say?" she replied, approaching the door confidently.

The warrior monks guarding it eyed her with concern at first, but their attention soon turned to the interior of the building. Passing by the two guards, a man in his thirties wearing a monocolored priest's outfit appeared from inside. Judging from his solemn demeanor, he was likely a high-ranking member of the church.

"Welcome home, our Divine King."

"See? I told you someone would recognize me," she stated, satisfied.

"I am Holaris, currently serving as archbishop. I found it hard to believe, but there is no way I could mistake your brilliance. As such, I have come to greet you."

"I see. These two are Knights. The girl has lost her arm in battle, so I would like for her to be healed."

"Very well, then. If you two would please proceed to the healing chamber..." Another staff member appeared from behind Holaris to guide them inside.

"I thought to start by returning home, but it appears things have changed somewhat. I'm having a bit of trouble getting there."

"Of course. Certainly, this must have been quite different in the era during which you were last active. We will visit your home first. Allow me to guide you to the heart of the Seat of the Divine King."

The ancient warrior entered the building with Holaris. The inside seemed to have been put together with great care, and had a pronounced solemn and religious atmosphere. Just as it looked from the outside, the interior was absolutely enormous, but moving pathways and elevators helped to compensate for the huge distance they needed to travel. While it took a considerable amount of time, at least it wasn't an exhausting amount of walking.

After a while, they reached the highest building at the center of the headquarters. Though it looked just as shabby as from the outside, being so close finally gave her a true feeling of having come home.

Upon entering, she noted that, while the passage of time was very clear, it was essentially as she remembered it.

Passing through the chapel, she reached her personal room. It contained nothing but a bed and table, but it looked like it had been kept quite clean.

"Now, then," she said, taking a seat. "Can we talk here?" She had been gone for over a thousand years. There were plenty of things she would need

to ask about.

"Of course," Holaris replied, sitting down across from her. "The only ones with the authority to come to this place are the ten archbishops, of which I am the only one currently in the capital."

"So, the ones keeping this room clean were the archbishops?"

"Yes, the ten of us take turns."

"Despite being in such a high-ranking position, you still take the time to do the cleaning?"

"Even archbishops must lead by example. Cleaning is part of our duty."

It seemed they had added it to their duties themselves, but that was hardly a bad thing. The Divine King was honestly impressed.

"Now," Holaris continued, "while we are most pleased by your return, it was thought that you were to continue keeping the Dark God sealed in the Garula Canyon. What has happened there?"

"The Dark God in the canyon has met its end. For now, that is all there is to say about it." If she were to tell him that some young stranger had simply killed it, she doubted he would understand. He would have to be satisfied with a summary for now.

"I see. What about the key to the seal?"

"What do you mean?" There was no key to the seal in the canyon. It was possible he was referring to a key for the tower itself, but she didn't know why that was important anymore.

"Hm, it seems you aren't playing dumb."

Something was wrong. And as she thought to question him about it, she realized that it was not just in her head — she couldn't move her arms or legs at all.

"We thought there was no chance you would ever return here, but even so, we made some preparations," Holaris said, his attitude now very different. There was no longer any respect in his voice.

"Political backstabbing, is it? How careless of me. I should have known there would be some rot after a thousand years."

According to what she had heard, the will of the church was now decided by a conference of archbishops. But that was only meant to act as a stand-in for the Divine King. Now that the Axis Church's highest-ranking member had returned, all of their authority would theoretically revert to her.

"No, the church itself hasn't changed at all. Just as before, it teaches

sacrifice of the self for the sake of the world, for the people. The archbishops are indeed pure, and act only as representatives of the Divine King. They would be overjoyed by your return, and would gladly hand over their authority to you. Even I have no objection to that."

"Then what is this?!" she asked with the last of her strength. The paralysis had already taken over her entire body. She wouldn't be able to keep speaking for much longer.

"There is no need to worry. We only wish for you to continue to serve as a symbolic figurehead for the people. Nothing will change." Holaris intended to seal her away without killing her, likely because he knew that if she died, she could simply reincarnate.

The Divine King could no longer move or speak. *I suppose I grew too soft over the past thousand years...*

She should have waited until she'd fully recovered before coming home. She should have known that the church would have changed over a thousand years.

As regret after regret swirled inside her head, the Divine King was once again sealed away within her own body.

ACT 2

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Chapter 12 — It All Ended Up This Way Because of the Three Eroge Nobles

The twenty-six Sage candidates were gathered in the reception room of the building, easily large enough to accommodate all of them. Strictly speaking, only twenty-four of them had received the Gift, so it wasn't clear to the others whether the remaining two should be considered "candidates," but either way, they were now settled into their mansion within the palace. It was almost like a small castle in and of itself.

After taking the group to the entrance, their guide had left them. At that point, the class had turned back to Yogiri and Tomochika. They'd hesitated to speak about internal issues in front of strangers, but now they were alone.

"I don't think leaving you two behind was a mistake." Yazaki was the first to speak. "In hindsight, there may have been a better way, but with the information we had at that point, there was a limit to what we could do with the people we had." For him to take such a defensive stance, there must have been some lingering guilt in the back of his mind.

The class that Yazaki had received from the Gift was "General." The General class had command skills, which helped groups to form cohesive teams focused on a single objective. As long as one concurred with his objective, he could even force others to comply to a certain extent. As such, the responsibility for the plan to use them as bait rested almost entirely with him. That being said, no one in the class had disagreed with his heartless scheme either, so it wasn't like they were free of blame themselves.

"I don't really care. I was asleep anyway." Yogiri meant it. He had never really gotten along with the class, so he didn't feel like he had been betrayed.

"Honestly, I'm not too happy about it, but complaining about it now would just get annoying, so let's leave it at that," Tomochika said firmly. "Or do you guys want to complain about us coming back?" Despite her words, it seemed she wasn't quite willing to let it go.

"Well..."

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“I believe we should accept them with open arms,” one girl interjected while Yazaki struggled to find a response.

“Who is that?” Yogiri whispered.

“Wait, you don’t know Akino? She’s, like, super famous.” Tomochika seemed shocked by his ignorance, but if he didn’t know someone then he didn’t know them; there wasn’t much he could do about it.

Her name was Sora Akino. According to Tomochika, she was the leader of a nationally famous idol group. After hearing that, Yogiri did notice that she seemed an awful lot more refined than the others, but perhaps because he didn’t have much of an interest in idols, he still thought Tomochika was cuter.

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“In a strange new world where we have few friends, how can we survive if we don’t cooperate?”

“But...can we trust them?”

“You just think that because, in the same situation, you would have been seeking some sort of selfish revenge, don’t you?”

Yazaki fell silent at the sharp rebuttal.

“I thought Yazaki was the leader,” Yogiri whispered again.

“I did too, but...” The moment Sora stepped forward, Yazaki seemed to lose all of his energy. Noticing Yogiri and Tomochika whispering to each other, Sora turned to them with a smile.

“However unworthy I may be, I am currently leading our class. I look forward to working with you.”

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After their conversation in the lobby, they each split off into their own rooms. Up until that point, they had been working in teams. With each team claiming one room, the assigning of quarters was over quickly.

The teams were apparently ranked based on their combat abilities, so Yogiri had been placed in the lowest-ranked team.

“If we’re not allowed to go up to the second floor, how come the girls are allowed to use the first floor freely?” one of the guys with Yogiri complained the moment they entered their new room. The second floor was reserved for the girls, while the lower level had been given to the guys.

“Come on, Yuugo. Takatou clearly has no idea who either of us are,” the other guy said.

Including Yogiri, they were now a team of three. As the class had been divided into seven groups, they had been deemed Group Seven.

“Yeah, who are you exactly?” Yogiri asked.

The room was quite spacious, holding four beds. Yogiri took a seat in one of the chairs prepared for them, and the others took a seat across from him.

“Are you serious? I talked to you all the time! About all sorts of things! I never saw you talk to anyone else, so I didn’t want you to be completely isolated!”

“Haha, Takatou always looked so sleepy, he probably wasn’t even listening to you.” The more energetic one was Yuugo Izumida, and the other

was Yukimasa Aihara.

“Well, we’re the useless ones, so welcome to the dropouts!”

“Yuugo, we haven’t assessed Yogiri’s ability yet. He’s only here because they didn’t know where to put him. I don’t know if we can call him a ‘dropout’ already.”

“Really? But all he does is kill bugs, right?”

As agreed earlier, Yogiri had told them that his class was Insect Hunter, and that his ability was to kill insects. He explained that his Gift had showed up late, but no one seemed to doubt his story.

“That’s right. What about you guys?”

“My class is Cook. My ability is that no matter what I make, it always tastes good, so it’s pretty useless in a fight.”

“My class is Reader. I can read books written in any language. I’m pretty fond of it myself, but like Yuugo, it’s basically worthless in combat.”

“It looks like our abilities come from our own personalities. I did always want to be a cook, and Yukimasa does love books. So, do you hate bugs or something, Takatou?”

“Sure? I mean, mosquitos are annoying, so I guess I’d say I hate them.”

“Yeah, anyone would hate mosquitos, though.”

Yogiri hadn’t given any thought as to why that particular ability might have been given to him. But just making it seem like he hated bugs would probably be the easiest way to pass it off.

“Can I ask how you guys got here? I’m curious about how the class managed this whole time. Yazaki divided you all up to start with, didn’t he?”

“Ah, yeah. We ended up like this because we started losing people. There are eleven guys and fifteen girls left in the class. There were more guys in the beginning, but a lot of them left to do their own things.”

Three of them must have been the ones Yogiri had first encountered back at the bus. There were originally nineteen in the class, so it looked like they had lost quite a few.

“Well, in the end, it probably ended up this way because of the three Eroge Nobles.”

“Who?”

Maybe the term was related to why Ushio had been called the Eroge Baron. Beside him, there must have been two more. Yogiri was quite curious, but before they could answer his question, they heard a knock at the door.

Yukimasa stood up and answered it, letting a shy, long-haired boy inside.

"Ugh, Fukai? What do *you* want?" Yuugo openly grimaced when he saw him.

"T-Takatou...c-could I speak to you for a moment?" Perhaps nervous, the new arrival spoke in a somewhat halting voice.

Unsurprisingly, Yogiri had no idea who he was.

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"So, what the hell does 'Eroge Baron' mean?" Tomochika asked her new roommates in their room on the second floor.

"That's what you care about most?!"

The one who answered her was Jiyuna Shijou. Together with Romiko Jougasaki, they made up Group Six. The groups were built in such a way to avoid mixing boys and girls, so this was the lowest-ranked team on the female side. Fighting had apparently been left up to Groups One through Five.

"I'm sorry for leaving you behind," Romiko said nonchalantly as she lounged on a nearby sofa.

"Ah, I guess I should apologize too. You said it was okay, but I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. There was nothing you could have done anyway. So, what is this Baron thing?"

"You really are stuck on that, aren't you?" Jiyuna said in an exasperated tone. "Well, I guess I can explain that too. Eroge Master, Shinya Ushio. Eroge Meister, Keiichi Munakata. Eroge Maniac, Mitsuo Yatate. I don't know who started it, but we've ended up calling them the three Eroge Nobles."

"Uh, is that Eroge-whatever their class name or something?"

"Yep."

"That's pretty cruel!"

"Then someone started calling Ushio the Eroge Baron. Munakata was the Eroge Marquis, and Yatate became the Eroge Count."

"Who came up with that? It sounds a bit mean to me."

"You say that, but it looks like you're enjoying it an awful lot."

"I don't think so, really, but please continue."

"Since the classes were handed out by the Sage, we didn't think it was any

fault of theirs that they got such a horrible one...but after we saw everyone else's classes, we figured out that classes reflect the personalities of the people who have them."

"So, we realized that *those* three like to play those kinds of games," Romiko added, "and all the girls started staying away from them."

"I mean, isn't it pretty normal for guys to do stuff like that? All of them do to some extent, don't they?" As a video game aficionado herself, Tomochika was a bit more in the know.

"Well, some people tried to be understanding. But Ushio's ability is Time Stop, Munakata has Invisibility, and Yatate's is Tentacles."

"How are tentacles an ability?!"

"Of course that's what would bother you," said Jiyuna. "Yeah, he can make tentacles grow out of anywhere. I've seen him do it, and frankly, it's gross. But anyway. For someone to play those games to the extent that *that's* the main facet of their personality, and for it to give them such easily abusable powers, people started keeping their distance. It's like an instinctive response. At the start, Yazaki acted as the leader, but he ended up losing control of them. Akino managed to pull things together from there."

"Akino's class is Idol, by the way," Romiko interjected again.

"Well, she's an idol in real life, so that makes sense." It was hardly a surprise to Tomochika that she'd end up with a class like that.

"Oh, this version of 'idol' is more like the statue kind, though. The more religious meaning —" As Jiyuna tried to explain, she was interrupted by a knock on the door, surprising them since they weren't expecting anyone to visit.

Tomochika stood up and opened the door. On the other side were Ryouko Ninomiya and Carol S. Lane.

"Excuse me, Dannoura! Could we speak to you for a second?" Ryouko blurted out the moment she saw her face, clearly stressed.

"Sure, come on in." But even as she invited them into the room, she felt suspicious. She had no particular relationship with these two.

"No, it's kind of a secret, so could you come out here?"

"Huh? Well..." Tomochika's suspicion grew. Ryouko looked totally flustered, yet Carol was perfectly calm. They made a strange pair.

"It's about Takatou! Please! We need your help!"

Tomochika sighed. "Fine. I'll be back in a bit," she called to the two

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inside. While she was definitely acting strangely, Ryouko also seemed awfully desperate.

And if it was about Yogiri, she couldn’t really ignore it.

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Chapter 13 — He Just Left It Behind...Do You Want It?

The boy who had come to talk to Yogiri was Seiichi Fukai. With his long hair covering most of his face and his downcast expression, it was hard to read him. Judging from the way he spoke, it seemed he wasn't very comfortable talking to others. Since Yogiri didn't even know his name, he had no idea what he wanted. But if there was something he wanted to discuss, there was no reason to object, so he invited him into the room.

Yogiri sat down on one of the sofas, Seiichi taking a seat across from him. For some reason, Yuugo and Yukimasa had stood up and moved away by the time they sat down. It seemed they found him somewhat uncomfortable to deal with.

"What's up?"

"Uhh...right. Takatou, I wanted...no, there's no point in hiding it or playing dumb, is there, Lord Okakushi?"

Yogiri went stiff at his words. Lord Okakushi, the Taker of Souls — almost nobody knew that title.

"Who are you?"

"A god of death. That's right! The invincible power over life and death is in my hands now. So I don't need to leave everything up to you anymore. Since Mother has no way of controlling you, I'll be much more useful...I'll be much more important..."

"You're not making any sense. What do you want?"

The two of them were on completely different wavelengths. It was like Seiichi was floating along in his own world.

"Up until now, I was told to keep an eye on you," Seiichi chuckled. "But I wasn't allowed to approach. Or talk. Or look at you directly. Don't you think that's unreasonable?"

"This guy was in our class, right?" Yogiri asked Yuugo, who was standing behind him. He had never spoken to Seiichi before but thought that

his face was somewhat familiar. Seiichi saying he couldn't look at Yogiri directly before seemed like a bit of a stretch.

"You really were out of it back then, weren't you? Of course he was in our class. I never really understood him, but since we got here, he's gone completely off the deep end. He's been talking crazy since we arrived."

It appeared that Yuugo didn't take Seiichi seriously. But as Yogiri wondered what had gone wrong with him, Seiichi slowly lifted a hand up to his face. Yogiri was trying to puzzle out why when the boy stuck his fingers into his own right eye.

Yogiri was taken completely by surprise, his feelings matched by short cries from Yuugo and Yukimasa behind him. As they watched in horror, Seiichi pulled out his own eye and placed it on the table between them.

"Looking directly at Lord Okakushi wasn't permitted. Because of that, my eye was gouged out."

Peering at the object, Yogiri realized it wasn't actually an eyeball. Although it was about the same size, it wasn't a human eye but a sphere with some kind of design drawn onto it. While it was obviously an artificial eye, Yogiri couldn't figure out why he had it.

"It's...a holy eye. It can see the supernatural. Through that dim, vague sight, I've always been...watching you."

"So, what did you take it out for? Are you trying to say that it's my fault?"

"I can't use this...anymore. Ever since I came here, it lost...its power. Mother's power...can't reach me...anymore."

That didn't seem like a good enough reason to go pulling out his own eye in front of others that way. Maybe it was perfectly logical in Seiichi's head. It wasn't like it was dangerous or anything, but Yogiri did find it unpleasant. Faced with a situation he didn't quite understand, he couldn't help but feel discomfort.

Seiichi slowly stood up.

"Is that all you wanted to say?"

"Yeah. I know...your power...is still mostly sealed away. So, I wanted to say...do whatever you like. Now I will take...that power over...for you."

In the end, Yogiri never determined what his classmate wanted from him. Although Seiichi seemed to know about him already, he had no idea what was actually going through the guy's head.

When Seiichi finally stepped out of the room, the tense atmosphere

immediately relaxed.

“There really is something wrong with that guy. I wouldn’t worry about him if I were you, Takatou,” Yuugo said.

Yogiri picked up the fake eyeball sitting on the table. Geometric shapes that looked almost like letters were floating inside it. It seemed to be particularly well crafted, but it was hard to imagine it having any sort of special power.

“And he just left something like this behind. Do you want it?” Yogiri asked, holding it out to Yuugo.

“No way! You’re just as weird as he is, aren’t you?!”

Yogiri shrugged and tossed the eyeball into the garbage. As he did, another knock came from the hall.

“You don’t think he’s come back, do you?” Yuugo asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe they just finished their meeting,” Yukimasa offered, referring to the leaders’ gathering. Groups One through Five each had a leader, and they worked together to decide how the class would act. Since Groups Six and Seven were merely catch-alls for useless members of the class, they had neither leaders nor the right to offer their own input.

“Hello!” The door opened, revealing Tomochika with two other girls behind her. “Takatou, can I talk to you for a bit? Ninomiya and Carol want to speak to you about something.”

“Hey, how come the girls are here for Takatou?” Yuugo complained as Yogiri stepped out of the room. “He was just as much a loner as you and Fukai, right? I only looked like a loner because I was careful with how I talked to people, so why aren’t girls coming to see a nice guy like me?!”

“Maybe because, unlike you and Fukai, Takatou actually looks somewhat decent?” Yukimasa answered.

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In the corner of the garden within the mansion prepared for the Sage candidates, a girl with long black hair in a school uniform was on her hands and knees, bowing in front of Yogiri.

“I’m really, really sorry!”

Her name was Ryouko Ninomiya, and of course, Yogiri had no idea why she was apologizing. The constant confusion about what was going on

around him was starting to sour his mood.

“Carol, come on! You apologize too!”

“Why? What I do?” the other girl, Carol S. Lane, said in broken Japanese. With her blonde hair and blue eyes, she didn’t have the slightest trace of Japanese features, which made sense, since she was American. She was also wearing a school uniform, since much of the class continued to wear the familiar outfits as their daily clothing.

“Stop talking like that! You’ll make him angry!”

“Fine, but why do I have to apologize? He said he didn’t care, right?”

“The first seal was released, wasn’t it?! So if you bug him even a little, he could kill you anywhere, any time! Instantly! We have to assume he’s already targeting the whole class. What else can we do but beg forgiveness?!”

“What exactly is this about?” Yogiri turned to Tomochika, starting to get fed up.

“Uhh, they said they wanted to talk to you about something, so they asked me to introduce you to them.” Tomochika clearly didn’t know what to make of things, either.

“You don’t have to apologize in the first place, let alone on your hands and knees like that.”

“But...”

“If you’re worried about annoying me, I’d say all this makes me more annoyed than anything.” Ryouko immediately shot to her feet. “Anyway, I don’t even know what you’re apologizing about.”

“Because we left you behind on the bus, of course. At the time, everything was so sudden and chaotic, we got swept up by Yazaki’s Command skill, and when we realized what we’d done, we were so far away that we couldn’t go back, but of course we never thought some lizard would be able to kill you __”

“Ahahaha! Seeing the cool and calm Ryouko get all worked up is kind of fun!” Carol laughed as she watched her classmate’s flustered explanation.

“Carol...oh, should I call you Lane?”

“Carol is fine,” she replied with a smile.

“All right, Carol, then. You guys know about me, I guess?”

“Yep. I’m from the Agency, and she’s from the Institute. Oh, and we also saw Fukai coming out of your room earlier, but he’s from the Cult. The three of us were sent to join your class to keep an eye on you.”

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“I didn’t think they’d let me just go about my life freely, but I never would have expected three people in my own class to be watching me...” Yogiri sighed. Admittedly, he had made no effort to get to know his classmates, but it surprised him that he hadn’t noticed.

“Man, I thought you’d figure it out right away since I was an American, but you were so disinterested, I was almost disappointed.”

“I can’t be suspicious of every foreigner I come across.”

He had already struck back at a number of organizations, so he’d assumed they knew better than to interfere with him. There hadn’t been any incidents since he had entered high school, but it seemed they were still observing him behind the scenes. “You’re not that scared of me, as far as I can tell. Do you and Ryouko see me very differently?”

“Seems that way. But it’s hard to blame her when we’re talking about someone who can kill just by thinking it. When we don’t know exactly what might set you off, it feels like we’re leaving it up to chance.”

“You all just decided that on your own, huh?” In his entire life, Yogiri had never killed someone simply because they were annoying him. That being said, having them come up with such a reason to be terrified of him was unexpectedly convenient.

“The Institute knows you better than any of us do, so Ryouko might know something I don’t.”

“I don’t need an apology, but I get that you want to apologize anyway. Like I said before, I don’t care about any of this, but if you want me to say it, then sure, I forgive you. But why did you bring Dannoura with you?”

“Right? If all you want is to apologize, why am I here?” Tomochika questioned.

“Well...I thought if she was with us, you might be more willing to listen...” Ryouko said softly, like she was grasping at straws. If she was from the Institute, she would have known more about Yogiri’s accomplishments than anyone.

“It seems you got yourself worked up over nothing, so could you stop trying to monitor me? I don’t want to be involved with any of you.” He was startled by the realization that there were people who knew about his ability in this world, but it didn’t change much. If they weren’t planning on getting in his way, then they weren’t a problem.

“Really?! I was ready to offer my body in exchange or something, but...”

“What?”

“Ahahahaha!” As Yogiri tried to figure out what Ryouko meant, Carol burst out laughing again. “Looks like she’s the type to back herself into a corner. Since you traveled all the way here with Tomochika, she probably figured you hadn’t killed her yet because she was willing to do whatever you told her to.”

“Wha—?! Definitely not! Nothing like that happened, okay?!” Tomochika hurriedly replied.

“But it’s strange, don’t you think?” Carol continued. “For a male high school student to keep himself under control beside such a cute girl for so long.”

“Huh? Oh, rather than self-control, I’d say it’s more like moderation...”

“Shut up! Don’t say stuff like that!” Tomochika shouted. Whatever she was currently thinking had turned her face bright red.

Chapter 14 — If You Want to Die That Badly, Do It Alone!

“But then what was your side dish for happy time?”

“Well, with the real thing right beside me, it wasn’t hard to use my imagination for the rest.”

“Could you guys at least try to be a bit more subtle?!” Tomochika desperately tried to cut off Carol and Yogiri’s exchange. “Use some delicacy! Why are you so blunt about this, Takatou?! And why are you encouraging him?!”

“Well, putting that aside for now,” said Yogiri, “could you tell us what’s been going on with the class? If you already know about me, that should make things easier.” Trying to explain his journey with Tomochika without revealing his true power would have to be done in a fairly roundabout way with the rest of the class. But with these two, they could talk freely without having to watch their words.

“Hey, why am I the only one here who seems bothered by this conversation?! You’re making me look like an idiot.”

“Sorry, I just enjoy your reactions so much,” Carol said with a laugh.

As if to deny her the satisfaction of another such reaction, Tomochika shut her mouth with a sullen look.

“So, what are your questions?” Carol asked, bringing the conversation back on topic.

“Basically, about the class structure. Like how you divided everyone into groups, and how you made it this far.”

“Ah, right, I was in the middle of talking to the others about that,” Tomochika mentioned, remembering her earlier conversation in the bedroom. She didn’t have it in her to sulk for too long.

“How much did you hear?”

“Just about the three Eroge Nobles so far.”

“Right. The powers we got in this world are quite strong and very useful

for surviving here. But what if that power was turned against us by one of our own? It wasn't long before everyone started considering that. The first example brought up was those three guys. The biggest problem was Munakata's Invisibility."

"Really? I guess the tentacles wouldn't be a huge problem, but wouldn't Time Stop be more of a concern?" asked Tomochika.

Yogiri wholeheartedly agreed with her assessment. The ability to stop time seemed incredibly powerful.

"Well, Ushio's Time Stop is a bit different. He stops time for whatever he touches, freezing it in place. While it's definitely formidable, you can at least defend against it to some degree."

"For example," Ryouko added, apparently having calmed down, "my class is Samurai, and Carol's is Ninja. As combat classes, we can move fast enough to kill him before he could even use his power."

"Then we have Munakata and his Invisibility," Carol continued. "On top of being able to turn himself and any other object invisible, he also has a kind of X-ray vision. That's where the real problem is. Since he can see through anything at any time, and there's no real way of telling when he's using it...yeah."

"Oh, I can see why people would not like him being around," Tomochika nodded. No doubt they were worried about him violating their privacy.

Yogiri personally thought it was a useful enough power that they would be better off turning a blind eye to such things, but he decided not to share his opinion. "Wait, did he just tell you about his power himself?" he asked. He found it hard to believe that someone would actually confess to having such an ability.

"At first, he didn't tell us everything," Ryouko answered. "In the beginning he just said he could make his weapon invisible."

"Yeah, up until Ootori busted him," Carol retorted.

Haruto Ootori had the class of Consultant. He possessed skills for analysis, which allowed him to make out the limits of everyone else's abilities.

"That...sounds bad," muttered Yogiri.

"Very bad," Tomochika agreed.

"So, the whole thing about you guys getting the Gift was a lie?"

"Kinda, yeah. We've got a sort of camouflage, but do you think he'll see

through it?”

“It’s hard to say. What rank is the camouflage?”

“What do you mean, rank?”

“Oh right, if you don’t have the Gift, you don’t know about the whole system. It’s not that difficult to understand, but a rank is given to all skills and items. Differences in rank are absolute. For example, if your camouflage is Rank One, then a Rank Two Discernment could see through it. If they were reversed, it would be impossible.”

“What if they were the same rank?”

“In that case, it would depend on your individual stats, I guess. There are a lot of variables that go into it at that point, so there’s a bit of randomness involved.”

Yogiri glanced at the ring on his finger. It looked plain and unadorned, but it gave no indication of anything like a rank.

“Mokomoko, can you tell what rank this is?” Yogiri asked the ghost floating beside him.

Those are Rank Six.

“It’s Rank Six,” Yogiri relayed.

“Who were you talking to just now?” Carol asked, confused. As a Dannoura ghost, only Tomochika and Yogiri could see Mokomoko.

“Dannoura’s guardian spirit.”

“Oh! That’s incredible! Where is it?”

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“Wow, they just believed you straight away,” Tomochika said as Carol began looking around.

“Well, come on. If other worlds are real, and magic is real, and people like Takatou exist, why wouldn’t I believe in ghosts?”

“I suppose. Guardian spirits seem pretty low on the rarity scale, don’t they? Probably nothing better than a Common.”

And why are you staring at me as you say that? Mokomoko demanded.

“Anyway, if the rings are Rank Six then you should have no problem. The highest rank in our class is only Rank Four.” According to Carol, the highest possible rank was ten. But for an ordinary human, three was the limit. Anything above that was superhuman, and anything seven or higher was in the territory of myth.

“Who exactly was this Celestina?” Tomochika wondered. The more they learned about this world, the more impressive the concierge seemed.

“By the way, the only one in the class with a Rank Four skill is Fukai, with his Instant Death Magic. Since no one else has a resistance skill that’s even equal to it, he was considerably more dangerous than Munakata.”

“Instant Death...you mean like Takatou?” Tomochika asked, her face blanching. After seeing Yogiri’s power firsthand, it was natural for her to be shocked by the idea of someone else like that being out there.

“Don’t worry, it’s not even comparable. Its success rate isn’t a hundred percent, and he can only use it on people he can see. Plus there are Instant Death Resistance skills out there, you can make substitution items to take the hit for you, and you can still be resurrected after he uses it on you. That being said, it’s still plenty dangerous to people like us.” In spite of her words, Carol didn’t appear to be all that concerned about him.

“So, we had a bit of an issue,” Ryouko cut in, getting back on topic. “The difference in our starting strengths was so vast, there was nothing for us to do but what the people with the stronger Gifts ordered. Then Akino made a suggestion: that we ban the use of our Gifts on each other.”

“That sounds good and all, but making a ‘promise’ wouldn’t actually stop someone, would it?” Yogiri asked. What Ryouko was saying was perfectly reasonable, but there were people in the class with skills like X-ray vision, which could be used without anyone knowing. Simply asking them not to do it could hardly compel obedience.

“Normally, you’d be right, but Akino’s class is Idol. She has an absurd

ability that can grant people's wishes."

"So, if someone wished that you were all unable to use your abilities on each other, it would just be true?"

"Not quite. With her Oath skill, anyone who makes a vow to her gets stronger if they keep it."

"And if they break it, they die?"

"Bingo! Rather than using her ability to grant wishes, we focused on her ability to put restrictions on others. The punishment for breaking your vow depends on what you gained from the wish, so we made people who seemed dangerous to the class vow not to use their Gifts on their classmates. In exchange, their skills all increased in rank. And having your skills rank up is enough of a bonus to deserve death if you break your vow."

That essentially meant that Sora Akino would have total control over the class. It didn't truly solve the problem of those with stronger Gifts dominating the group, but the girls had all supported her being the leader anyway. While trying to restore cohesion to the class, she was given the position as a move to compromise with the girls, who had become the majority.

"So, if I'm understanding Akino's ability correctly, doesn't that mean we're kind of screwed?" Tomochika asked. After all, if they didn't actually have the Gift installed, a skill like Akino's wouldn't have any effect on them. The moment she tried to use her Oath skill on them, she'd realize they didn't actually have that kind of power.

"Things are getting kind of annoying..." Yogiri muttered, causing Ryouko's face to drain of color.

"Th-Then, don't worry! I'll go get rid of Sora Akino right away!"

"Whoa, whoa, calm down! Don't you think we should find a nicer solution?!" Tomochika cried, jumping to stop the girl, who had already drawn her sword and was turning to leave.

"As long as your fake Gift doesn't get revealed, you should be fine, right?" Carol noted. "Akino can't just grant any wish she wants, and there's a limit to the number of people she can use it on. She probably won't use it on someone who doesn't present a real threat."

"I guess we'll cross that bridge when we get to it," Yogiri said, feeling surprisingly optimistic.

"Speaking of which, why did you two even rejoin us? If you could make it

all the way here on your own, you'd have no problem making it in this world without us."

"We want to talk to this Sage Sion person. She's the one who summoned us here, so we were hoping she'd know how to get us back."

"Get back?" Carol asked as she and Ryouko shared a surprised look. It was almost like they had never even considered the possibility. "Uh...well, yeah, I guess you'd want to go back..."

"I was kind of working under the assumption that it was impossible," Ryouko commented. "Like becoming a Sage was the only option available to us."

It isn't quite brainwashing, but it does look like their thinking has been somehow influenced, Mokomoko mused. She had once said that the Gift made people more combative and suppressed their aversions to violence. It wasn't hard to believe it could divert their thoughts away from home as well.

"Hey, Takatou, if we tell everyone and try to find a way back together..."

"No, I don't think that's a good idea. Right now, we don't have a choice but to accomplish this big feat if we want to connect with Sion, so introducing another objective will just create confusion," he answered, rejecting his friend's suggestion. Sion had given them one month; they didn't have time to split their resources.

"Now then, I'm sure there's more to talk about, but can we leave it for next time? I feel like the leaders' meeting will be over soon," Carol suggested. The representatives would be returning to explain what they had discussed, and everyone would need to be back with their groups for that.

"Okay. For now, we're working together, right?" Yogiri asked, just to be sure.

"Yeah, that was my intention," Carol replied.

"Please give me any orders you like!" Ryouko added.

In spite of his initial concerns, having people who knew about his situation made things a little easier for Yogiri.

For the moment, they decided to return to the mansion.

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Confirming that Yogiri and Tomochika had left, Ryouko breathed a sigh of relief. Though she was still covered in a cold sweat, she had made it

through the encounter, and he had even made it clear that he accepted her apology. It was a passing grade for the moment.

"He doesn't seem all that invincible, does he?"

"Wh-What are you talking about?!" Ryouko couldn't believe Carol's attitude.

"Don't you think? He got caught up in being transported to this world just like the rest of us. And he always lived underground at the Institute, didn't he?"

"Well, that's true, but..."

"In short, if you don't have any intention of killing him, and you're not targeting him specifically, then transporting him somewhere or isolating him against his will is possible. In that case, don't you think it's possible to nullify his powers?"

"Hey, don't even think about that."

"And with the way he's dedicated himself to Tomochika, he seems like an ordinary high school boy. If that's the case, we could even use her as a hostage —"

"Shut up!" Ryouko shouted, suddenly grabbing Carol by the collar. "Listen! That is the absolute worst method! What do you think will happen to someone who tries that?!"

Carol didn't seem to have any idea. No matter how harmless he appeared, you couldn't let your guard down around him for an instant. When it came to Yogiri Takatou, there was absolutely nothing you could do against him. Even so much as thinking of a way to fight him was dangerous.

The Agency that Carol had come from should have known full well how much of a threat Yogiri was, but apparently their attitude towards him was very different from the Institute's. The Agency felt that, no matter how powerful the phenomenon, even if they didn't fully understand it now, someday they would be able to break it down and take measures against it.

But the Institute had no such delusions. To them, Yogiri Takatou was all but a god of disaster. As a being beyond human reach, they could do nothing but quietly accept the calamity he brought them, begging on their knees being their only hope of quelling his wrath.

"Take hostages? Are you stupid?! From now on, we're the exact opposite of that! We have to do everything we can to protect Tomochika!"

"I think that's going a bit far..." Carol tried to brush off her concerns, but

Ryouko tightened her grip, lifting her off the ground.

“Would you just stop?! Stop acting like this is all some sort of game! This isn’t just about you! It’s not about me or even humanity! Don’t get the whole world wrapped up in this! If you want to die that badly, do it yourself! Just kill yourself right now and be done with it! I’d be more than happy to be your second!”

“Sorry...” Faced with such intensity, Carol finally offered a rare apology.

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Meanwhile, at the leaders’ meeting, it was decided that the Sage candidates would head underground to try their hand against the Dark God and its spawn.

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Chapter 15 — Seems Like the Class of Someone Who Only Wanted to Save Themselves

The Sage candidates decided that, for their great feat, they would defeat the Dark God. The choice was made primarily by process of elimination. Realistically, they had no idea how to prevent an invasion from another kingdom. Standing up against an entire nation was beyond their current abilities, and if it escalated to all-out war, they wouldn't be able to avoid killing people. No matter how combative they had become, they still hesitated to kill other humans.

In contrast, slaying a Dark God was much easier to imagine. At the lowest level of the Underworld below the capital, there was an ancient being. All they had to do was go down there and kill it, so there was nothing to cause hesitation. And all they would meet along the way were the creature's evil spawn. With opponents that weren't remotely human, they had no reason to hold back. They could wield their powers to the fullest.

After the meeting, a plan of action was presented to everyone. The various groups were assigned duties for collecting information or supplies, and their preparations began in earnest.

The day after their audience with the king, Groups One through Five left to carry out a reconnaissance mission. And though Yogiri and Tomochika had been assigned to Groups Six and Seven, which had been left behind on standby, the class still wanted to get a grasp on their combat strength, so they were brought along on the mission with the others. Tomochika joined Group One and Yogiri was sent out with Group Two.

The environments of the Underworld varied widely, but the entrance was cramped enough that they couldn't operate in large groups. For that reason, Explorers who traveled to the Underworld to exterminate the Dark God's spawn restricted themselves to groups of six or fewer, so the Sage candidates

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decided to do the same.

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The entrance beneath the palace was strictly controlled. There were numerous entrances throughout the capital, so access to the Underworld itself wasn't particularly limited, but it was different here, where it was connected directly to the royal abode. For that reason, the Sage candidates couldn't all flood the entrance at once, so each group entered one member at a time.

There were a number of rooms dividing the path that led downwards. In the event of an emergency, the rooms could be closed off to prevent anything from reaching the surface. Group One entered first, deciding to meet in the room just in front of the entrance, with Tomochika being the last to arrive.

"You guys don't look like you're in a different world at all!" she blurted out the moment she saw the others.

Sora Akino, the leader of Group One, who was responsible for keeping the entire class united, was wearing an outfit that would be fit for performing on stage back in Japan. "Yes, these are almost the same as the outfits I wore in my concerts."

They must have been custom-made for her. Though they seemed far too flashy for an ordinary person, she pulled off the look easily.

"How did you even get something like — wait, Carol, what are *you* wearing?!"

Carol S. Lane was dressed in a bright red ninja outfit. Complete with forehead protector and sword, she looked more combat-ready than the others, although it didn't offer much in the way of protection.

"I'm a ninja!"

"Then be sneaky about it! Disappear into the darkness somewhere!"

"What a stock comeback!" Carol laughed. "How many times do you think people have said that to me?"

"So fix it, already! Anyway, enough of that. What is it *you* have on, Ninomiya?"

Ryouko Ninomiya wore a traditional formal Japanese outfit and carried two swords. She had said her class was Samurai earlier, so maybe she was trying to match the look. Despite the fact that it was clearly a male uniform, it looked quite good on her.

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“Sorry, I never wanted to wear something absurd like this either, but...with the whole Clothing Bonus system, I didn’t really have a choice.” In short, each class had a matching outfit style, and the closer one’s chosen clothing was to it, the better one’s stats and skills became.

“If you think we’re just messing around, you probably thought that about me the most, didn’t you?” the fourth member of the group, Yui Ootani, commented apologetically. She was dressed like a cheerleader, complete with pompoms in her hands.

These four made up Group One, with Tomochika being their provisional fifth member.

“Isn’t your defense kind of low, though? I don’t know what sort of monsters are down there, but if they bite you or whatever, won’t it go straight through?” They didn’t look appropriately dressed for infiltrating a nest of hellspawn.

“These clothes actually offer a good bit of protection, but it’s not like we’ll get hit that often anyway.” Sora seemed plenty confident in herself, even though she didn’t look especially strong in her Idol outfit.

“You seem pretty into it yourself, Tomochika! What is that, Superhero style? Sci-fi?” Carol asked, inspecting her outfit intently.

“I’m not really dressed like this because I want to be...” Her body was clad in a skin-tight suit, the black material covering everything except her head. Critical parts of the body were guarded by a red armor of some kind, which had a dull glow to it. She had wrapped herself in a black coat that almost reached her knees, but it was thin enough that it didn’t do much to hide her figure.

The outfit was made from the material she’d received from the giant robot Aggressor. Since its form could be changed, Mokomoko had reshaped it into armor.

In truth, I wanted to cover your face as well. At least I’ve managed to work a bit into your hair, so there will be some defense against attacks to the head, Mokomoko remarked, leaning back with a smug expression as she admired her handiwork.

“If you cover my face, they’ll think I’m some sort of freak.”

“I see. So, that’s what an Egoistic Blacksmith does, huh?” Sora seemed impressed, but Tomochika could only give a weak laugh in response.

Egoistic Blacksmith was the name she had offered as her “class,” telling

the others she could make weapons and armor, but that only she could use them. In reality, she could have easily given such items to others, but without Mokomoko nearby, she couldn't make any alterations to them herself. In order to prevent it from becoming an issue, she just told everyone that she couldn't share them at all.

"So, obviously I made this myself, but where did you guys get stuff like Idol and Ninja outfits here?"

"Harufuji from Group Three made them for us. Her class is Dressmaker." According to Sora's explanation, as long as she had material to work with, the Dressmaker could create any sort of clothing desired. And not just regular clothes either — she could also imbue the items with special effects. It was pretty versatile for a creative-type class.

"I see. Harufuji was pretty good at sewing, but wait...what does that say about *my* class?" Tomochika wondered aloud.

"It makes it look like you're only interested in saving yourself," Carol suggested.

"Wow, that sounds terrible, doesn't it?" Just like Carol said, she must have looked incredibly selfish to everyone else. "Well, whatever. I'm the last one, right? Shall we get going?"

"No, since this is our first time here, we hired a guide...and here he is now," Sora answered, looking towards the entrance.

The door opened, and a man in silver armor walked through.

"It's been a while, Miss Dannoura."

"Rick?!"

The new arrival was none other than Rick, the swordsman she had fought alongside at the tower. In short, the current Swordmaster.

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Group Two consisted of Haruto Ootori, Suguru Yazaki, Seiichi Fukai, and Shinya Ushio. Yogiri had joined them for the time being as well.

Haruto's class was Consultant, so he specialized in analysis. That alone made it unclear how useful he'd be in combat, but judging from the fact that he was in Group Two, it seemed likely he could hold his own.

Yazaki's class was General, so he could make use of all kinds of combat tactics. Perhaps because of his class, he had donned a sturdy-looking metal

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armor — a sharp contrast to the school uniforms the others wore.

Seiichi's class was Death God, his power being Instant Death Magic. Because of that power, or maybe because he was just hard to get along with, his classmates kept their distance from him. Yogiri was hardly one to talk about not getting along, though.

Ushio's class was Eroge Master. While the name didn't reveal much about his ability, he could stop time for anything he touched. It was effective on both life forms and objects, and it would feel to the target like they had skipped forward in time.

Ushio's altercation with the king was fresh in everyone's minds, but the fingers he had lost had already been fully healed.

Finally, their last companion was David, the same vice-captain of the city guard who had stopped Yogiri and fought with Tomochika outside the gates of the capital. Yogiri wasn't sure why a soldier was working as a guide to the Underworld, but it was probably due to his affiliation with the royal family.

"The members of the royal family have sealing powers. That's the main reason our bloodline has managed to keep a hold on this country."

The royalty's power to weaken the Gift was just as effective on the monsters of the Underworld as on the Sage candidates. Of course, the strength and range of that power varied from person to person, and whoever possessed the strongest power would become king.

"So, don't feel like you're safe or anything just because I'm here. The monsters on the lower levels can completely ignore my ability."

"Well, it's more of a problem in and of itself. We're here to test our own strength. Can you restrain your power at will?" Haruto, the leader of Group Two and representative of the remaining guys in the class, asked, earning a haughty response from David.

"Of course. If that's the case, shall I guide you to where there are some monsters?"

Group Two walked through the first floor of the Underworld, a cave-like area carved out of rock with a height and width of about three meters. The caves formed a complicated network in which one could easily become lost without a guide. Metal rods were stuck into the ceiling here and there, their tips giving off a dull light that made the Underworld surprisingly bright.

"Those collect small traces of mana in the air to give off light," David explained. "Placing torches in the areas they've explored is another one of the

Explorers' jobs."

In short, the areas with light were relatively safe, and had already been cleared and mapped out.

The group followed David as he guided them through the caves. After walking for a while, they came upon an entirely empty area. It was a huge, wide-open space, large enough that they couldn't see the far side.

"I assume you've done some research," David said, "but I'll explain anyway. The layout of the Underworld is like a bowl. Basically, where we are right now is barely scratching the surface of it."

It was estimated that each floor of the Underworld was about ten kilometers wide, laid out in a ring. The outermost ring had a diameter of one hundred and forty kilometers, the second, one hundred and twenty, and the seventh ring spanned only twenty kilometers.

Though shocked by the sudden change in scenery, Group Two soon recovered and continued onward. Directly ahead, the ground abruptly ended in a cliff. According to David, there would be an opposite cliff somewhere in the distance, but that was a hundred and twenty kilometers away. There was no way they could see that far.

Looking down, there was nothing but empty darkness; the cliff itself was almost perfectly vertical, so without climbing equipment, descending would be effectively impossible.

"It's quite similar to Hell in the Divine Comedy, isn't it? Though in that case, there were nine levels," Haruto remarked, referring to a work by the Italian poet, Dante.

Yogiri remembered a game he had played based on the motif of the Divine Comedy. "Hey, if this place is shaped like a bowl, couldn't you just jump diagonally down from here to reach the center?"

"So I've been told," David answered. "There have been quite a few reckless Explorers who tried just that, but none of them ever made it back. So it has become customary to find the entrance to the next level and proceed normally."

"How far down is the bottom level?"

"Supposedly, about one kilometer."

"What? There's no way we'll make it that far down!" Ushio interjected. "We're going to spend such a stupid amount of time just traveling? How did anyone ever make it all the way to the Dark God?"

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“They didn’t, of course. The farthest we’ve managed to reach is the third floor.”

Ushio stared back in surprise. Clearly, he had thought it would be a rather simple endeavor.

“Ushio, we figured that out when we were investigating the layout of the Underworld earlier. Were you even listening?” Haruto sighed, exasperated.

“We’re more interested in defending the capital than progressing downwards,” David explained. “For that, thinning out the ranks of the monsters on the second floor is sufficient. Even those who do it for a living make enough money that way. There isn’t much incentive for them to go any farther.”

They had assumed that defeating the Dark God would be fairly easy compared to repelling an invasion, but at this stage, their prospects weren’t looking so great.

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Chapter 16 — This Is, in Its Own Way, A New Dannoura Style

Carol and Ryouko, as a Ninja and Samurai respectively, were incredibly strong. Though the monsters on the first level of the Underworld were the weakest, they weren't just wild animals. From boars covered in spikes to giant armored bears to living skeletons, none of them were things that ordinary humans could match. Even so, Carol's shurikens easily punched through the boars, and Ryouko's sword split the armored bears in two effortlessly.

More impressive was that they did it all with pure technique. While their stats were no doubt admirable, they didn't use any of their skills at all.

"It seems there wasn't much need for me here," Rick said, clearly impressed.

With Carol and Ryouko taking care of the enemies that appeared, everyone else felt like they were just sightseeing. Rick stood ready to jump in if there were any problems, but he had yet to have the chance as the two girls cut down their foes without breaking a sweat.

"So, wait, you're a prince or something, right?" Tomochika whispered to Rick beside her. "Is it all right for you to be in a place like this?" She had just learned that Rick, or Richard, was the third prince of the Kingdom of Manii.

"Of course the king doesn't have such liberties, but the rest of the royal family spends a significant amount of time in the Underworld. After all, we are lauded as the royal family for our ability to keep this place under control."

"Well, there's that, I guess. But you're the Swordmaster now, aren't you?"

With the death of the previous Swordmaster back at the tower, Rick had inherited the title. Apparently, he didn't think of himself as being strong enough to merit it, but there had been no other qualified candidates at the scene, so he'd had no choice but to accept the responsibility.

"And you are a Knight of the Divine King, are you not?" Rick replied.

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Having passed the trials in the tower themselves, Tomochika and Yogiri had both become Knights.

The things that threatened this world could generally be divided into two classes: Aggressors and Sealed Gods. Aggressors were those who invaded from the outside. The times and locations of their appearances, as well as their numbers and strengths, were all unknown. The ones responsible for dealing with them were the Sages, who paid little heed to other dangers to their world.

In contrast, the locations and threat levels of the Sealed Gods were more or less widely understood. They were the responsibility of the Divine King, along with her Swordmasters and Knights.

The Underworld the students were now in was one such place, where a Sealed God was attempting to interfere with life on the surface by creating monsters. It wasn't strange at all for Swordmasters or Knights to visit this place.

"Actually, I kind of want to give up that title..."

"You don't have to worry about it so much. There's nothing we can do to compel foreigners like you to act in any case. Oh, and we have also prepared holy swords for you, so whenever you have the time, please visit the church."

"Holy swords, huh?" Tomochika sighed. They were the identifying mark of Knights of the Divine King.

There may have been some benefits to being a Knight, but it seemed there would be just as many drawbacks, so Tomochika was still on the fence about whether she wanted to accept that burden. That being said, as a gamer at heart, she couldn't help but be interested in the idea of having a "Holy Sword."

"The Swordmasters before me could never leave the tower, but things are different now. As the next Swordmaster, I believe I have a duty to conquer the Underworld. And if I may say so, Sir Takatou should have no problem accomplishing such a feat, no?"

Rick was aware that Yogiri had killed the Dark God in the Garula Canyon. While Tomochika couldn't imagine what kind of feelings that knowledge inspired in the new Swordmaster, he must have thought that putting aside his pride and dealing with the Dark God in the fastest way possible would be for the best.

"It's kind of hard to say. It's not like he has to see the person he's killing,

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but...”

It is probably impossible. In the case of the other Dark God, the creature’s aura was enough of a threat to his life to allow him to respond. There is no such aura of evil in this place, and the monsters it has created are entirely separate entities from the Dark God itself.

Tomochika relayed Mokomoko’s assessment, but judging from his reaction, it appeared Rick hadn’t had much in the way of expectations.

“Sorry to interrupt your conversation, but are you good to go, Dannoura?” Sora called out.

“Wait, isn’t it your turn next, Akino?”

“Yes, but given how easily Ninomiya and Carol handled things here, it doesn’t seem like there’s much need for me to participate.” She seemed confident enough in her combat abilities.

“I’m not really suited to combat myself,” Yui Ootani, the Cheerleader, chimed in. Her ability was more for supporting others and increasing their stats.

Tomochika turned to look at the battlefield. Carol and Ryouko had reduced their enemies to a single monster. They had spared one skeleton in order to gauge Tomochika’s abilities in combat.

As Carol and Ryouko returned to the party, the skeleton ran in pursuit, prompting Tomochika to step forward to intercept it.

“Just a skeleton, huh? Will martial arts be good enough against something like this?”

It’s humanoid, so there shouldn’t be any problems.

“How are its joints even stuck together? If it can just detach them at will, I don’t see how my techniques will work on it.”

Tomochika sized up her opponent. The skeleton had a sword and shield as if it were a warrior of some kind. The bones making up its body didn’t even connect at the joints and were just floating in place. Even so, it looked and acted like it was a single coherent body, so she thought it best to view it as having invisible flesh and ligaments holding things together. Its center of gravity seemed to match that theory, at least. Therefore, she could treat it like a human.

Having come to that conclusion, Tomochika stepped forward and kicked, smashing the creature’s knee in a wrestling move known as a Yakuza Kick. The moment one’s opponent had all their weight on one foot, you stepped in

with a stomping kick. She had chosen that for her first move in part because the skeleton's legs were wide open, but also to see how it would react to its legs being kicked out from under it.

Her opponent clearly shifted its attention to its damaged leg. As expected, it reacted just like a human would.

As its posture collapsed around the injury, its head was left wide open, so Tomochika's next move was obvious. "Give me the heavy one."

Got it.

A black blade appeared in her hand, shaped like a large kukri knife. She brought the heavy blade down onto the skeleton's head. Its skull shattered easily, the rest of its body promptly falling limp.

That was how Tomochika would fight to survive in this world. With her strength and speed enhanced by her battle suit, and the ability to materialize and reshape any type of weapon she wanted, she could easily dispatch enemies that she came across. This was the final result of having analyzed the material they had obtained from the Aggressor.

"I never got the chance to see your prowess at the tower myself, but I guess I'm not surprised."

"Well, it seems you are plenty strong."

Both Rick and Sora seemed genuinely impressed.

"Maybe there's no point in getting that close, though," Tomochika said. "Let's go for the long one."

At this rate, I'm afraid your weapon is too convenient to even make this experience worthwhile as training. Well, that's fine. I suppose this is, in its own way, a new Dannoura style.

Without turning around, Tomochika reached behind her. A spear immediately appeared in her hand, its tip punching through the head of a newly-appeared cyclops. About ten meters long, the weapon struck dead center, not even the slightest waver to its tip.

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Carol and Ryouko were speechless.

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Yogiri slipped through the black lines that were tracing around him one after another. The lines of death represented a certain, absolutely fatal danger. But on the other hand, if he didn't let the lines touch him, he would never die.

A moment after he moved, a fur-covered arm passed through the space he had just occupied. Contrary to popular belief, he was actually quite agile. He had always been naturally athletic, and he was a fast learner. He had a reputation for being lazy, which led others to believe he had poor reflexes, but in truth, he just didn't have many opportunities to exercise.

Ever since coming to this world, however, he'd had plenty of chances to practice. And since he was only doing the absolute minimum necessary to avoid the oncoming attacks, it wasn't even that tiring.

Right now, Yogiri's abilities were being tested, so the members of Group Two were watching him from all around. He was currently locked in combat with a slender, caveman-like creature. About the same size as a human, one might think it was a kind of monkey, but its four arms put a quick end to that notion. Dodging a beast like this required a serious effort, but the movements themselves were simple enough.

Having figured out his opponent's methods, Yogiri moved to attack back, swinging his sword along the lines of death. He could be sure that his enemy would be on the other end, so it was effectively a counter. But as expected of a typical high school student, even with an enhanced weapon, a single attack wasn't enough to finish off his opponent.

It did, however, give him ample chance to display the results of the impromptu sword fighting lessons Tomochika had given him. After repeating that pattern a number of times, the monster exhausted itself, pausing just long enough for Yogiri to deliver a fatal blow.

"Not terrible, I guess," Haruto said in assessment. Though Yogiri had performed perfectly well, his combat abilities were unarguably limited.

"If you can move like that, you should fit into my formation, no problem," Suguru Yazaki added. Although Generals were strong on their own, their true strength began to shine when they had a group of allies to command.

Shinya Ushio wore a relieved expression. He must have been satisfied to

see that Yogiri wasn't good enough to threaten his own place as one of the strongest members of the class. Seiichi Fukai, on the other hand, showed no particular reaction. He kept his usual downcast expression, seeming completely uninterested if Yogiri wasn't planning to use his power.

"What's with you?" David muttered, astounded. "Your movements are clearly amateurish, yet you dodged every attack without fail. Your swordsmanship is nothing impressive, but you landed every single hit. You remained calm from start to finish, and even delivered the finishing blow without so much as a moment of hesitation..." Perhaps that was the expected reaction from someone who was actually a trained swordsman.

"Are you sure you don't want to see my insect-killing power?" Yogiri called out to Haruto as he made his way back to the group.

"It doesn't matter. I doubt we'd conveniently come across an insect-type monster."

"Skills don't work that well down here," David added. "What rank is your skill, anyway?"

He was referring, of course, to the royalty's power, which served to forcibly reduce the rank of all skills in the area. On both the surface and the first level of the Underworld, all skills were reduced by two ranks. On the second floor, they were reduced by one, and by the time they reached the third floor, they would be beyond the king's reach. That applied to humans and monsters alike, and any skill brought down to Rank Zero would be completely unusable.

The sword and clothes Yogiri wore had been enhanced by one of his classmates. Her skill was Rank Four, which provided a Rank Three benefit to his equipment. Factoring in the king's power, they were currently only experiencing a one-rank increase.

"If you're relying solely on your skills, even a single decrease in rank is a huge problem. So the most powerful creatures avoid coming as high as the second floor. Which means the monsters on the third level and lower are incomparably stronger than the ones you will encounter here. That's another reason exploration hasn't proceeded too far past the second floor."

"I see. In that case, I suppose we need to visit the third floor," Haruto remarked. "This seems sufficient for preliminary scouting, though. Shall we head back for now?"

Their first expedition had strictly been to get the lay of the land, so they

decided to return in the afternoon.

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Also satisfied with their experience, Tomochika's group was making its way back to the surface. The monsters that would occasionally appear to attack them were immediately cut down by Carol and Ryouko, leaving nothing for the rest of the group to do. The opponents they encountered on the first floor were no match at all for them.

"By the way, what rank is the skill you're using, Tomochika?" Rick asked. "The fact that you are using it at all means it must be at least rank three, but that's my best guess."

"Uh, rank?" Tomochika replied.

"I'm concerned about whether I can safely add my sealing power."

By overlapping his own power with the king's, the strength of the seal would be increased. Thanks to the king's ability, all skills were reduced by two ranks in the area. With Rick's power on top of that, though restricted to a limited area, they could be reduced by another two ranks.

"Oh, I'm not sure. I don't really know that much about it," she replied, dodging the question. "But wait, if that's the case, couldn't the royal family form a group and just seal all of the monsters' powers?"

"That's possible to a degree, but it would also result in us sealing each other's powers, so it's only useful up to a point."

It seems I should also be taking skill ranks into account, Mokomoko mused. *Perhaps if Rick uses his power, I should turn off your battle suit, leaving you naked?*

"Just try it. I'll send you to the next life in an instant."

Oh, you think you're capable of such a thing, do you?

"If I'm that embarrassed, who knows what I'll ask Takatou to do?"

Really now, your attitude toward your ancestors is a serious problem...

As they were speaking, they reached the exit of the Underworld. But this was the place they were most likely to let their guard down, so just in case, Tomochika looked around one more time. As she did, she saw movement at the edge of her vision.

Something gold was jumping from the floor to the walls to the ceiling. It was shaped like a box, small enough that she could have carried it alone, but

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it also had insect-like legs which allowed it to hop around the room.

Carol immediately threw a shuriken at it. The attack struck dead on, and the box dropped to the floor. It must have been some sort of monster, but with a shape like that, it was hard to determine where its weak points were.

The creature tottered back to its feet, apparently still alive.

“Ah, it looks like a Dunfer,” Rick commented, as if they had found something rare.

“Who gave it such a silly name?” asked Tomochika.

“That’s the name people discovered it had after using analysis skills on it. Perhaps the Dark God named it?”

She couldn’t understand why. As Tomochika puzzled over the creature’s name, the Dunfer scuttled away.

“Uh, guys, it’s escaping.”

“That’s fine. It’s nothing particularly dangerous, and besides —” As Rick explained, the critter scurried off into a side tunnel.

Even if it wasn’t that strong, it was still a monster. If it was going to attack people, it should have been dealt with. As Tomochika considered whether to pursue it, a voice called out from the tunnel the creature had fled into.

“I’m done for!”

The cry was followed immediately by a loud explosion. Tomochika peeked into the tunnel, seeing only the scattered remains of the box-like creature.

“Dunfers run off to explode somewhere harmless once they’re defeated, and apparently drop some valuables when they do,” Rick concluded as he stepped up beside her.

“Why does something like that even exist?!”

In the center of the box’s scattered remains was a jewel. She couldn’t tell what the Dark God had been thinking when it had made a monster like this. Its existence gave Tomochika an uneasy feeling that she couldn’t quite put into words.

Chapter 17 — Good Evening. My Name is Sage Sion. Do You Remember Me?

The plump young man, Daimon Hanakawa, and the spawn of the Dark God, Lute, who had now taken the form of a young girl, had finally made their way to the capital.

“It’s pretty crowded, huh? Is there a festival or something going on?” Lute asked upon seeing the nighttime streets still filled with people.

“Heheheh, you sound like a true country bumpkin! Something like this could be seen anywhere in Japan. Are you saying it’s rare in this world?”

“You’re really letting the fact that I spared you go to your head, aren’t you?” Lute was getting fed up with the guy but had given up on getting angry with him. Hanakawa was running his mouth almost nonstop, as if he were totally safe. “You realize there are plenty of ways I can hurt you without killing you, right?”

“Heheh! As long as I know I won’t die, there’s nothing for me to fear. I am a Healer, after all! No matter what injuries you inflict, I can return myself to normal right away. As long as I resolve myself to seeing your torture through to the end, I have nothing to fear!”

“Is that so? By the way, our objective is underneath the city.”

“Oh? It must take a lot of guts to build a city of this size on top of a Dark God that’s intent on killing people.”

“That’s because of my lord’s seal. It’s not like it can escape whenever it wants.”

That was information the humans didn’t have. The sealing had happened over a thousand years ago, after all, so it wasn’t surprising that they didn’t know the particulars. According to legend, the High Wizard had sealed the beast below and built the town on top of it, but in reality, all the High Wizard had done was put up the walls around the city. The Underworld itself had all been created by the Dark God Albagarma for the sake of locking away his own sister.

“But even if she’s trapped down there,” Lute continued, “her spawn can still reach the surface. Of course, the humans haven’t just been sitting on their hands up here. A certain bloodline has been maintaining another seal on top of that. As such, the ranks of all skills are reduced while in the area. So, what do you think? Shall we test how effective your healing is here?”

Hanakawa moved in a flash. Before Lute could even finish talking, he had dropped to his hands and knees, paying no mind to the people around them.

“I let it go to my head! I’m sorry!”

“Don’t you think you rely on begging a bit too much?” Lute retorted, looking down at him.

“If someone like you is willing to talk if I do this, then at least it will buy me some time! If I have time, then maybe they’ll change their mind about what they were planning to do, and my chances to live will go up!”

“Fine, just stand up already.” Having him on his hands and knees in the middle of the street was attracting too much attention.

Hanakawa slowly got to his feet. “So, now that we’re in the city, what’s next?”

“Well, obviously we need to go into the Underworld, but I don’t know where the entrances are or how strictly they’re controlled. First, we’ll need to do some information gathering.”

“I see. In situations like this, I suppose the typical thing to do is visit a tavern,” Hanakawa said, recalling details he had gleaned from various manga and video games.

“A tavern, huh? You mean like that one?”

“The problem is that we look like children. We could certainly go in, but they’ll just be like, ‘Hey, where’s your mom?’ or ‘If you’re looking for some milk, try somewhere else.’” Numerous shop signs around them bore pictures of beer glasses, bottles, and kegs. “Aren’t there an awful lot of them, though? Well, I suppose we might as well try taking a look inside.”

With nothing else to go on, they chose the closest option. While they might be accosted for looking too young, the fact of the matter was that Hanakawa had a spawn of the Dark God with him. With the confidence that thought engendered, he strode boldly into the tavern.

“Welcome! Table for two?” a waitress greeted them in a friendly voice. She didn’t seem to have any intention of trying to shoo them away.

After being guided to a table, Hanakawa ordered some food and drinks.

He had spent a great deal of time living in this world, so he was well aware of the best things to order to get the most out of a place like this.

"This is my first time coming to a tavern," Lute said. "How do we gather information here?"

"Now that you mention it, I'm not sure. Maybe we just listen in on others' conversations?"

"Jeez, you were so confident, I thought you had an actual plan. Hey, excuse me," his companion called to one of the waitresses, "can I ask you a question?"

"Ohh! How natural! Maybe I could imitate you to attract girls for myself?!"

"There seem to be a lot of people outside. Is there a festival or something going on?"

"Hey! Didn't you hear me?!" Hanakawa interrupted. "For a city like this, that many people is perfectly normal —"

"There is!" the waitress interjected. "The Sage candidates made it all the way to the fifth floor of the Underworld! No one has ever made it past the third floor before, but they got that far after only a few days! It's the first time anyone has made significant progress in almost a thousand years, so everyone is celebrating!"

"Wh-What?!" Hanakawa cried as Lute looked at him with a smug expression.

"And even better! Some of the Sage candidates even came to our establishment! Look, right over there!"

Hanakawa looked over to where the waitress was pointing. Three boys wearing a familiar uniform were sitting around a table: Shinya Ushio, Keiichi Munakata, and Mitsuo Yatate. Three guys he had regularly seen hanging out together at school.

They had been outcasts a bit because they talked about nothing but eroge, but even though Hanakawa was treated in the same way by their peers, he'd never had much contact with them. Of course, part of that was just a difference in their hobbies, but they had also made fun of him for being a disgusting nerd when they did speak.

"Who cares if the game makes you cry, you're still just going to rub one out in the end," Hanakawa muttered as he glared at the trio, old grudges quickly rising to the surface. "Wait, this is bad! We can't be seen by them!

We have to do something!” As far as those three were concerned, Hanakawa had ditched the class without warning. He couldn’t just show up in front of them like nothing had happened.

“‘Something,’ huh? Well, that’s no problem.” Lute waved a hand in the air. “I put up a barrier to make people pay no attention to us.”

“Will that be enough?”

“If I made us completely invisible, it would be more trouble than it’s worth.”

“For being a spawn of the Dark God, you’re pretty stingy about stuff like this, don’t you think?”

“All right, fine, let’s go introduce ourselves. Oh, come on! If you do that now, the camouflage won’t work!” Lute stopped Hanakawa the moment he saw him try to drop to his hands and knees again.

“Heheh! If they won’t notice us, perhaps we should get closer and try to overhear their conversation? They’ve been spending time in the Underworld after all, right?”

“That sounds like a good idea...but something seems off.” Lute stopped Hanakawa again as the boy made to stand up. Looking back at the three candidates, he saw a woman in a hood standing beside them.

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“Who the hell does Takatou think he is?!” Shinya Ushio, the Eroge Master, complained drunkenly. “Just showing up out of nowhere and snapping up all the good girls...”

“He goes off every night with Ninomiya, Carol, and Dannoura, right? Jeez, I’m jealous!” the Eroge Meister, Keiichi Munakata replied. He had numerous empty beer bottles beside him. And while that would be a problem in Japan, more than half of the students had taken up drinking since they had come to this world.

“He didn’t do nuthin, either,” Mitsuo Yatate, the Eroge Maniac, agreed. “They only call him when there’s bugs. Ushio’s working way harder, so why aren’t we popular like he is?!”

The three of them had been good friends since they had entered high school.

“Well, that’s because they started calling us the Eroge Nobles, right?”

“But why just us? We didn’t get powers like this because we wanted them!” Ushio raged as Munakata slammed back another drink.

“If the Gift reflects people’s likes and interests, anyone would want to be able to stop time, or see through people’s clothes, or be invisible in a changing room, or be able to tie people up with tentacles, right?! So why do the girls look at us like we’re trash?!”

“No, the tentacles thing is just you.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of different.”

“Why?!” Yatate wailed, rejected by even his own friends.

“Well, you guys are still better off,” Ushio vented enviously. “You can do what you want without anyone noticing.”

They couldn’t use their powers on their own classmates, but as long as they targeted anyone else, their abilities could be used freely.

“I suppose. I did get a good look at that waitress earlier.” Munakata’s invisibility power was pretty wide in scope, allowing him to see through anything he wished as well.

“Hey, I can’t use the tentacles secretly either. And no, I don’t use them like *that*. I just enjoy feeling things with them.” Yatate could sprout tentacles from wherever he wanted, and he could feel anything that the appendages did.

“But there’s nothing I can do with my Time Stop that wouldn’t be illegal.” Ushio’s power allowed him to freeze objects in time. It was incredibly useful in battle, but it wasn’t particularly well suited to covert erotic pursuits. The objects he stopped were made completely inanimate, so even if he froze a girl, she would feel like stone to the touch.

“But really, do we even need to use our powers? We don’t need the girls in our class. Why don’t we just go to, like, a brothel or something? This city seems degenerate enough to have places like that.”

“Don’t you think the girls will look down on us even more if they find out?”

“They already see us as hopeless perverts; who cares what they think anymore? We have lots of money, and we’re heroes exploring the Underworld now, right? Don’t you think we’ll be popular with the locals?”

“That’s...that’s right! Who cares about the class?!”

Having struck on a great idea, the trio toasted themselves. After gulping down their drinks, they noticed that someone was standing beside them.

“Good evening. You are the Sage candidates, correct?”

It was a young woman. Even without hearing her voice, the hooded cloak she wore wasn’t enough to hide her figure. The three boys immediately grew excited at the sight of her.

“Hey, just like I said, heroes like us are popular!”

“Looks like. There’s no way guys as amazing as us wouldn’t be popular, right? Normally, all kinds of girls would be coming to us!”

“Huh? But...” As Munakata tried to use his X-ray vision on her, he realized something was off.

Using your Gift against other classmates is against the terms of your Oath. Are you sure you wish to proceed?

He had received a warning message from Sora Akino’s skill. Due to its effects, if they broke their oaths, they would die, but at least it was lenient enough to give them a warning beforehand.

The girl removed her hood, revealing a familiar face: Ayaka Shinozaki. One of the classmates they had left behind as bait on the bus.

“So, you’re alive too?”

As the three of them stared at her in shock, she grabbed Ushio’s wrist.

“Got you,” she said with a sweet smile. She then pulled her right hand back, punching Ushio in the face with all her might.

The strike knocked him into the table, sending it flying, but Ayaka held him in place by the arm. Climbing on top of him as he fell to the ground, she began raining blows onto his face.

The sudden attack sent a wave of excitement through the tavern. Perhaps things like this were commonplace, as the other customers seemed to be enjoying the show.

“Stop it!” Yatate screamed as numerous slimy tentacles sprouted around him.

While they were forbidden from using their powers against their classmates as a rule, it didn’t apply in the case of self-defense.

His tentacles wrapped around Ayaka in an attempt to restrain her, but she didn’t slow down in the slightest. Without paying the writhing mass any heed, her continued assault on Ushio quickly tore the tentacles to pieces as well.

Yatate let out a cry, crumpling to the floor as the agonizing pain of the tentacles being ripped apart was transmitted to him.

“Wh-What is wrong with you?! Why are you doing this?!” Munakata could use his invisibility freely, but it didn’t seem all that useful in this situation.

“Revenge, of course,” Ayaka returned matter-of-factly as she continued to beat her hapless victim.

“What are you doing, Ushio?! Stop her!”

“I-I’ve been, trying —”

“There’s no way something like that would work against a dragon,” Ayaka cut in.

The other customers had been looking on merrily before, but the brutality of the scene finally struck them silent. Even so, none of them moved to stop her. Anyone who tried would likely be killed. That much was obvious to anyone witnessing her ruthless attack.

The only sound echoing throughout the tavern was that of Ushio’s face being punched over and over. Eventually, he stopped moving, and Ayaka finally ceased the bombardment of fists.

She rose to her feet, her hands dripping with blood. “Now then, Munakata?”

“Y-Yes?!”

“I’m going to be coming after you all, killing you one by one. So make sure you’re properly terrified. Can you tell the class that for me? Oh, that’s right...if there’s a body, they might be able to revive him, right?”

Ayaka pointed towards Ushio’s body. After uttering a short chant, the corpse — and the floor of the tavern below him — was incinerated.

“Every single one of you is going to end up like that.”

And at those words, the remaining customers in the tavern scattered like flies.

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“Wh-What was that?! Wasn’t Ayaka supposed to be a spoiled rich girl character? When did she go insane?!” Hanakawa was completely shocked by his former classmate’s sudden display of cruelty.

“Wow, that was amazing,” Lute breathed, impressed. From the perspective of the Dark God’s spawn, Ayaka was rather something.

Hanakawa began to panic. “Judging from what we saw, she is quite

offended by having been left behind on that bus. In that case, I may be one of her targets as well!"

"Oh, really?"

"What do you mean, 'Oh, really'?! What are you going to do if I get killed?!"

"I said I wouldn't kill you, sure, but that doesn't mean I care if someone else does."

"What about Yogiri Takatou? Without me, you won't even know who he is!"

"Those boys were with the Sage candidates, right? If I ask one of them, I'm sure they'll tell me."

"O-Oh...but, uhh, after traveling so long together, I'm sure we've developed something like a friendship, right? And you'd be all, 'Like hell I'll let him die here! The only one who gets to kill him is me!' And then when you and Ayaka fight, you'll end it with something like, 'You know, traveling with you wasn't that bad after all...'"

"Absolutely not."

"I figured..." Hanakawa made sure to remain as still as possible while they talked. Ayaka seemed satisfied with killing Ushio for the time being, as she quickly left the tavern after that. "W-Well, maybe we should head somewhere else to look for information."

The customers had all left and the staff were in a total daze, so there wasn't much to be gained by staying. But as the two of them made to leave, another customer entered.

"Oh, did something happen here?"

A beautiful girl in a white dress had entered and was looking around the tavern with an amused smile. Her eyes met with Hanakawa's.

"Huh, looks like the stealth thing isn't working," Lute muttered, confused.

"Are you Hanakawa, by any chance? Good evening. My name is Sage Sion. Do you remember me?"

At the unmistakable danger now facing him, it was all Hanakawa could do not to scream.

Chapter 18 — I Like to Keep Things Neat and Tidy

“Yes, I am indeed Hanakawa, and of course I remember you. Please allow me to take my leave!”

She had come to an empty tavern and spoken directly to him, so trying to slip by unnoticed was pointless. He decided instead to bet on the possibility that she had just happened to be there, and had just happened to recognize him.

“Oh, and where are you going?”

But of course, he lost that bet. As expected, she had come specifically in search of him.

“Well, you see, we are looking for information on the Underworld. As you may notice, there’s not much to be gained by staying here, so we’ve decided to go ask somewhere else —”

“Ah. Well then, why don’t I tell you about it? I’m sure I could provide most of the information you need.” As she spoke, Sion walked into the empty tavern and took a seat at a random table. She clearly had no concerns about Hanakawa trying to make a break for it.

“Maybe if we run now...” Perhaps they could disappear into the crowd gathering outside, he thought.

“Give it up, idiot.” Lute wasn’t so optimistic. “Nothing good will come of making someone like her angry. You’ll just have to sit down for now.” It seemed to Hanakawa that, despite his strong front, Lute was pretty shaken.

“Umm...are you perhaps implying that you can’t beat her?”

“Yes.”

“After all that talk about how powerful you are as a spawn of the Dark God, you can’t even beat a single woman?”

“Why are you being so annoying? I’ve never overstated my abilities. She’s just on an entirely different level.”

“In that case, my plan of escaping in the confusion while Master Lute,

spawn of the Dark God, fights the Sage Sion is all for nothing!"

"Don't try to get me wrapped up in this. I have nothing to do with it."

"Are you sure you aren't starting to develop feelings for me? 'Dammit! I screwed up! At least you...have to survive...!' Something like that?"

"My objective is to resurrect my master's younger sister and avenge him. I don't have time to be messing around with your stupid games."

"B-But...a Sage has come to visit *me* specifically, so maybe this isn't something I need to be so pessimistic about..." Still, Hanakawa couldn't help remembering that Sion had killed the bus driver on a whim. He had no idea what might set her off. Just having a conversation with her was plenty dangerous.

That being said, forcing her to wait any longer was equally hazardous. Hanakawa reluctantly sat down at the table with Sion and looked at her timidly. Though she was smiling, he had no idea what she was thinking.

As he was wondering what to do, Lute sat down beside him. "Don't get the wrong idea. If she thinks we're together, there's a chance she'll attack me if I try to leave, that's all."

"Oh, and now you've turned *tsundere*!" Hanakawa turned to Lute, his eyes sparkling. "In that case, I can even forgive your lack of genitals!"

"If you keep saying stuff like that, I'll leave you alone with her."

"Sorry! I'm really sorry! Thank you for staying!" Hanakawa sincerely apologized at the prospect of being left alone, then finally turned to the Sage. She was sitting there quietly, so he decided to start the conversation himself. "Umm, perhaps this is just me being too self-important, so I feel I should make sure just in case, but is it possible that you came here specifically to find me?"

"That's right. I came here to ask you about Yogiri Takatou."

Hanakawa promptly launched into an explanation of everything that he knew about Yogiri: the times he had witnessed his power in use, the story Yogiri himself had given him, and everything that had happened at the tower. He spat out all that he knew, not holding a single thing back.

"I see. This is the first time I've heard that he can detect killing intent, too."

"Hey," Lute interjected, "what do you plan on doing with this Yogiri?" The boy was *his* target, after all. It made sense that he would be interested in the Sage's objective.

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“Who knows. I’ve been worrying about what to do with him for a while. Getting rid of him seems like the most efficient option, but I feel there’s some benefit to be gained from keeping him alive as well.”

“You don’t have to do anything. I’m going to kill him.”

“Master Lute! How dare you speak like that to a Sage!”

“Yes, well,” Sion replied, unbothered by the hellspawn’s attitude, “I’m not sure I can expect much from an underling of the Dark God that Yogiri himself killed.”

“What?!” Lute shouted, standing up.

“Ah, even without my plotting, Spawn vs. Sage looks like it’s going to happen! But if it happens here, I’ll get caught up in it too...so let’s calm down! Let’s settle this peacefully!”

“Oh, don’t worry, I won’t waste my time fighting here,” Sion said, making her lack of interest plain.

But as Hanakawa sighed in relief, another shiver ran up his spine — she was pointing a hand at him.

“Uh, umm, what are you doing?”

“I’ve heard what you have to say, so I figure I’m done with you.”

“Uhh, perhaps I’ve misunderstood, but is there a need to kill me just because we’re finished talking? I am still a Sage candidate, aren’t I?”

“But you’ve gone off on your own, so it doesn’t look like you have any intention of becoming a Sage, do you? I have a very methodical personality, and I like to keep things neat and tidy. Leaving leftovers around just creates unnecessary stress, don’t you think?” Sion said with a pleasant smile.

“Haha. And unnecessary things should be eliminated immediately, right? Like cutting off all your worldly desires...hey!”

Sion’s hand began to glow. Hanakawa squeezed his eyes shut, certain that he was about to die...but what he felt was neither a blazing fire nor the sensation of his body being torn apart. Instead, he’d been enveloped by a gentle warmth.

Hesitantly, he opened his eyes to find that he was covered in whipped cream.

“What is wrong with you?!” Lute shouted at the Sage. It seemed the spawn had protected him somehow.

“Well, that’s certainly interesting,” Sion observed. “I thought a heat ray would be enough to incinerate him, and for you to turn it into whipped cream

was unexpected. But if I know you can do that, then —”

“P-P-Please, wait! The Underworld! Didn’t you say you were going to tell us about the Underworld?!”

“Oh! I totally forgot!” Legitimate surprise came over the Sage’s face. “So, what did you want to know?”

“Well, we were wondering where the entrance was, and things like that.”

Hanakawa felt like he should find some way to drag the conversation out, having come so close to losing his life, but he didn’t have the composure for that now. Merely keeping the conversation going in some way was the best he could do.

“There are an awful lot of entrances around the city. You can buy a ticket at any tavern.”

Hanakawa blinked in surprise, caught off guard by such a simple answer.

“Entry to the Underworld is restricted,” she continued. “The taverns act as sales windows for tickets with which one can gain entry, so try just asking at one.” There were numerous entrances to the Underworld, each with its own unique characteristics. The prices of the tickets varied too.

As if that was the end of the conversation, Sion stood up.

“Uhh, perhaps I shouldn’t say anything, but am I free to go?” It was unfortunately Hanakawa’s personality to ask questions when he knew he should keep quiet.

“Sure. There’s no point in telling you about the Underworld if I kill you right afterwards.”

Sion made her way out of the tavern. Having decided to kill him on a whim, she had apparently decided to spare him on a whim as well.

Lute slowly lowered himself back into his chair. His expression was strained, a cold sweat pouring down his face. “Dammit, what the hell is she?! That’s ridiculous...what on earth was she thinking?!”

“And why did I have to get covered in whipped cream? Who wants to see that?”

Hanakawa just couldn’t stop himself from whining about the most irrelevant things.

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The Sage candidates had split themselves into shifts, taking turns

progressing through the Underworld. Throughout the day, the vanguard would push forward, exterminating any monsters that they encountered. At night, the defense teams would secure the gains they had made during the day.

Tomochika remained with Group One, which was one of the front-line teams responsible for exterminating monsters. Yogiri, however, spent the majority of his time lounging around the mansion. On the rare occasion someone needed insects killed, they would call on him.

When the vanguard teams returned to the surface, they were free to do as they liked with their time. So when night came, Yogiri and the others would get together to share what information they had on the situation. They decided to meet at a hotel they'd discovered before having reunited with their classmates.

The meetings consisted of Yogiri, Tomochika, Ryouko, and Carol. They had only been selected because they knew about Yogiri's power, of course, but people were already spreading rumors about them.

"So, what exactly do you do during the day, Takatou?" Tomochika asked.

"There's nothing to do, really, so I just play games or read books."

"That's...somehow unsatisfying after all the time I've spent killing monsters." Since she was fighting on the front lines, she found it hard to accept that Yogiri was just relaxing back in town.

"No, having Takatou do nothing at all is for the best, really! Please keep doing your best to sit around and do nothing at all!" Ryouko offered.

"Don't encourage him. How is he supposed to be a functioning member of society like that?"

"Hahaha, hasn't he already been forced to join society?" Carol added with a laugh. And it was true; they had all been thrown into the limelight upon being transported to this world. They couldn't simply relax like they could have done back in Japan under the care of their parents.

"I'll take care of him!" Ryouko exclaimed. "We can't have Takatou doing anything! I'll take care of everything he needs, so that we can make an environment where he doesn't have to do anything at all!"

"What's gotten into you?!" Tomochika snapped.

"So, you want me to be a bum? I think that's a bit much for me."

Yogiri's refusal made Tomochika feel a little better. She had been worried that Yogiri might be happy to accept a life where he didn't have to do

anything at all.

"How's the situation in the Underworld looking?" he asked.

"We've made it to the end of the fifth level, so tomorrow we'll start on the sixth."

For the Sage candidates, progressing through the Underworld wasn't particularly difficult. Basically, all they had to do was keep moving forward. Using Munakata's X-ray vision, they could easily find the shortest and most direct route to the edge of the level.

First, they used the supplies they brought to set up base camps on the edge of each level. Even setting up a simple shack wasn't something that an amateur could do easily, but luckily, they had someone who specialized in that area. One member of the class with the Carpenter skill was enough to get everything done in no time at all.

Along with a candidate who possessed the Transporter class, they could make headway incredibly fast. The Transporter connected the doors of two buildings to allow for instant teleportation between them. Thanks to those two skills, the students didn't even need to find the entrance to lower levels. After reaching the edge of one level, they would just make a building, reinforce it, then drop it down to the next level. While there were some risks for the first group teleporting in, it was orders of magnitude faster than searching for the actual entrances to each level.

But even with the shortcuts they created, the swarms of monsters attacking them remained unchanged. And the farther down they went, the stronger the monsters became, slowing their progress even more.

"If the seventh level is the last one, then we're almost done, but..."

"Yeah, our deadline of one month is almost up, but even at this pace it seems like we'll just make it in time." In spite of Yogiri's doubts, Carol was optimistic.

"Well, even if we fail, Sion will probably show up. So it doesn't matter to me either way." If she was going to appear, Yogiri figured it would be when their time ran out.

"I don't know about that. She said she would turn us into livestock for producing magical energy if we failed, but do you think she'll really bother?" Carol asked.

Tomochika thought that expecting the Sage to leave them alone even after their time ran out was a bit unlikely.

“And what about that Eroge guy dying?”

“Right, Ushio actually is dead. Munakata and Yatate’s story was a bit vague, but we have enough witnesses from the scene to confirm it. Munakata said the killer was Shinozaki. Apparently, she’s going to take us all out one by one as revenge,” Ryouko reported.

Ushio’s death had been a sobering discovery for the class. It was the first time anyone from their group had died.

“Wait, isn’t *Shinozaki* dead?”

Tomochika knew that Ayaka Shinozaki was one of the four people who had been left behind as bait on the bus. She was the first one to be attacked, impaled through the chest. Tomochika hadn’t checked to see if she was dead, but it was hard to believe anyone could survive such an experience.

“Yeah, she was,” Yogiri confirmed. He had been the one to put the bodies of the other two students back into their seats, so he was even more certain of it than Tomochika was.

But if that was the case, what was going on? Tomochika couldn’t even begin to guess.

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Chapter 19 — Fatter People Live Longer, Right?

As Ayaka Shinozaki wandered the nighttime streets of the capital, she was beginning to regret her declaration of war against the class. They were quite famous, so she had managed to find some of them just by asking around. But while that had been enough at first, after finding and killing Ushio, the rest of the group had stopped going out so much. The city was absurdly large. At this rate, she wouldn't be able to find them again.

We are now aware of their true strength. We know where their base is, so why don't we attack them directly?

The Sage candidates were, as part of their trials, making headway into the Underworld below the city. As such, they were currently staying as honored guests at the palace. She had figured out that much from listening to rumors around town.

"If I did that, my plan of making them fear me coming to get them would all be for nothing."

No, we don't have the full picture yet. It would be best for us to act cautiously.

Sneaking in and killing them one at a time like a mysterious serial killer would be better, don't you think? Now that they know they're being targeted, they aren't just going to walk around town.

I recommend we refrain from such activities.

"That's probably a good idea."

Wait, you're actually going to accept my suggestion?!

"I should just go to their home base. Then I'll kill one of them and leave. How about that?"

That will only work once, won't it? Once they realize their base has been compromised, surely they'll flee to somewhere else.

Taking revenge is all well and good, but why not just hurry up and kill them? Is it really something you need to spend so much time on?

It would be best if we could easily track their movements somehow.

Can't we track them by scent or something?

We could release the limiter on our sense of smell, but we still only have so many scent receptors. It won't change all that much.

How about through magic?

Perhaps. Identifying and locating them based on individual mana should be possible, but we would need to meet each of them once to learn their patterns in the first place.

So, we'd have to go to their base, after all. For now, we just need to find one of them. Then we can attack them at our leisure.

Ayaka was beginning to think that maybe she was going crazy. It was getting harder and harder to differentiate between herself and the other units, to the point where she could no longer identify which unit was speaking at any given time. It made her wonder if the units weren't all merely figments of her imagination.

As those thoughts swam idly through her head, a sudden jolt to her skull knocked them out of her mind.

What was that?!

An impact to the head. The Dragon Scale was able to block the blow, but it didn't absorb the impact completely.

Detecting a minor concussion.

Her eyes were drawn to something on the ground, a stone about the size of her fist. That must have been what had struck her.

What are you waiting for?! Stop the human simulation already!

"I guess I'm not human after all," Ayaka murmured to herself as the dizziness was swept away in an instant. There was no way this was all a wild delusion if she could cut off all physical sensations on a whim like that.

A sniping attack!

Where is it coming from?!

North-east, thirty degrees up! Another attack incoming!

Ayaka looked towards where the unit was indicating. Three more rocks were flying her way. She dodged the first, and it struck someone unlucky enough to be standing behind her, sending them flying in a spray of blood. The other two appeared to have been thrown slightly off target as they smashed the skulls of two other passersby in front of her.

I've determined the sniper's vantage point.

“I see. Then let’s go. Dragon Wing.” Using the dragon’s language, Ayaka manifested the phenomenon of flight, rising into the air as if she had wings of her own. Gliding smoothly, she reached her destination in no time.

On the roof of a tall building, she found a girl in a white martial arts uniform. Riona Shirayama: one of her classmates, and one of the targets for her revenge.

Riona was caught completely off guard by how quickly Ayaka had made it to her. She had evidently planned on spending more time sniping, as evidenced by the large number of similarly-sized rocks scattered around her feet.

“Maybe I shouldn’t be the one to say this,” Ayaka said, “but are you sure you want to get strangers involved here?”

“If we leave you alone, none of us will be able to sleep at night. If killing you means taking out a few locals too, it’s well worth it.”

“Well. It seems you’ve grown quite self-centered. No wonder you were able to leave your own classmates behind as bait without a second thought.” Ayaka had never really been willing to forgive them, but at this point, there was no room whatsoever for sympathy.

“Finishing someone off from a distance doesn’t match my style much, anyway,” Riona answered, taking a fighting stance. “This really is the best way to handle things!”

Ayaka recalled that her opponent used to practice Karate, so her white uniform and black belt must have been related to that.

She seems like the type to use karate for actual combat. Though it’s really more like imitating kickboxing at that point... mused one of the voices in her head.

“That’s awfully judgmental of you, Battle Unit.”

With a shout, Riona jumped forward and attacked, but Ayaka made no effort to dodge. Punches, kicks, and elbows rained down on her in rapid succession from all angles, but Ayaka took every blow without so much as flinching. She had been taken by surprise before, but now that she was ready for it, the attacks were nothing to her.

“Dammit!” Riona cursed, backing off as she realized she wasn’t making any progress.

“How strong are you compared to the rest of the class?”

“When it comes to hand-to-hand fighting, I’m the strongest!” As she

shouted her reply, a burning light began to envelop her body.

"What's that?"

It seems like an ability granted to her by the Gift. Perhaps some sort of power-up?

"That's not very useful information, is it? Dragon Claw."

Not bothering to wait for her opponent to finish, Ayaka swung her hand as if swatting a fly. An invisible strike launched from her fingers, cutting through the air like a dragon's claw tearing through flesh. Riona blinked dumbly as she felt the attack rush past her, followed a moment later by the roof beside her collapsing.

As a chunk of the building fell away, her right arm also fell to the ground. Riona cried out in pain as she collapsed.

"Of course, I could have just hit you head-on," Ayaka said, stepping closer, "but I don't want to kill you right away. I need you to be properly terrified first."

She kicked her classmate in the stomach. Although her feet were reinforced by the Dragon Scale, she didn't put that much strength behind it.

"Goddammit!" Still curled up on the ground, Riona struck with her remaining hand. Perhaps her power-up was complete, as a burning aura now wreathed her fist, but it had no effect on Ayaka. There was no way the fire could penetrate Dragon Scale.

"If you're the strongest hand-to-hand fighter, the rest of the class must be pretty weak, huh?" Ayaka said as she stepped on Riona's left arm, holding the dismembered right arm in front of her. "Now then. Why don't you try begging for your life? Who knows, I might even change my mind about killing you."

Of course, she had no intention of sparing her. All she wanted was to see how ugly Riona would look as she desperately struggled to survive.

"I-If only there was no skill reduction...if I could use my abilities at Rank Four, I'd never lose to you!"

Ayaka paused. Although she was likely just making excuses, it sounded like Riona truly believed that.

Skills granted by the Gift have ranks attributed to them, but within this region, those ranks have been forcibly reduced. Of course, since our abilities rely on the dragon's language instead, it has no effect on us.

"What is your ability, anyway?" Ayaka asked. "What changes when your

rank goes up?”

Riona stared back in defiant silence.

“Dragon Fang,” Ayaka said, activating it from her foot. An invisible jaw clamped down on the other girl’s arm. Slowly, Ayaka added more and more force, but not enough to tear the arm off completely — this was only a threat, after all. “If you’re so proud of your Rank Four or whatever, surely you can tell me all about it?”

“It increases all my stats...at Rank One, it multiplies them by ten times. At Rank Two, a hundred times. Rank Four is ten thousand times...but right now I’m stuck at Rank Two...”

“I see. A hundred times or ten thousand times your current power would certainly be another story. Is there any way to remove that block?”

According to the information gained from the people of the dragon, the reduced abilities are the result of the royal family’s power. Killing the wielder of that skill should be sufficient.

Ayaka dropped the arm she was holding, stepping away from Riona.

“Looks like your excuses helped. Once I’ve released the block on your skills, we’ll fight again.”

“What are you talking about...?” Riona asked, not quite understanding that she was being spared for the moment.

Are you sure?

“Yes. Now that we’ve seen her, we can track her through her mana, right?”

She could kill her at any time. Using Dragon Wing, Ayaka again lifted herself into the air. Looking around, it didn’t take her long to find the palace, the largest building at the center of the city.

She began flying towards it.

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Hanakawa and Lute found a tavern to purchase tickets from, then immediately made their way to the closest entrance to the Underworld. Each tavern sold tickets for the entrance nearest them, so it wasn’t particularly hard to find it.

The entrance itself was a small stone structure. Despite its size, it was decorated well enough to look rather high class.

Handing over their tickets at the reception desk, they made their way inside. Within was a spiral staircase heading farther underground.

"Is it true the Underworld spans a hundred and forty kilometers?" Hanakawa asked as they made their way down. "That would make it much larger than the city itself, but I was under the impression the city was built specifically to guard against it."

The capital was an enormous metropolis in its own right, but it couldn't have been much more than ten kilometers across. There was no way it matched the size of the Underworld.

"Just because we're going underground to get there doesn't mean the Underworld itself is only 'underground.' It's called the Under*world*, after all. If it was just sitting there beneath the city, it would be called an underground labyrinth or something instead."

"Indeed, I suppose that's true."

In short, the Underworld was an entirely different world whose entrances merely existed within the capital.

After heading down the stairs for a while, they came upon a cave. Despite the depth, it was remarkably bright thanks to the lights lining the ceiling.

"So, this is the first level," Lute said. "This is the first time I've been here. My master's sister should be on the lowest level, I suppose."

"Hmm, if the first level is ten kilometers wide, that would mean the center is seventy kilometers away, no? And each level is one kilometer vertically. Even if we write off the first level as a measuring error, that means the seventh level would be six kilometers down...I'm not sure how we're supposed to make it there!"

The interior of the Underworld was indeed a labyrinth. It wasn't as easy as walking in a straight line to get where you were going.

"I wondered what it would be like when we got here. But whatever, I guess there's nothing for it but to get started."

"Um, excuse me! You don't plan on just walking straight in, do you?!"

"How else are we going to get there?" Lute asked as he began doing just that. "If you don't like it, I'll leave you behind."

"I was under the impression I was being forced to accompany you..." If it was possible for him to escape now, Hanakawa doubted Lute would be willing to chase him all the way back to the surface. But even so, he was hesitant to try. Who knew what kind of trouble he'd get into? In the end, he

decided to follow Lute after all.

"There are monsters here, right? What if we get attacked?"

"The ticket was cheap, so there probably aren't all that many."

The distribution of monsters across the Underworld wasn't uniform. Areas with larger concentrations of them were considerably more popular, so prices for entry were increased or decreased to encourage the even use of all entrances across the city.

"These monsters are the spawn of the Dark God who's sealed inside, right? Does she not mind that they're being used like a resource on the upper levels?"

"I doubt it. Even spawn that are strong enough to kill humans are like strands of hair that fell out on their own. Who cares what happens to them?"

"I feel like such hair is plenty valuable..."

"What are you talking about?!"

"Well, this Dark God is a woman, right?!"

"Are you really that gross?"

"Heheheh! Fetishes for physical excretions are pretty common. Do you not even know that much?"

"You really are disgusting." Lute was as astonished as ever.

"By the way, do you know where we're going?"

"I'm just picking paths at random, actually."

"What?! But we'll never reach the center that way! And I am not at all prepared for this!"

At the rate they were going, even if they were never attacked by monsters, it would still take days for them to reach the center. As he had only been expecting them to take a quick look inside, Hanakawa hadn't made any preparations for a journey or enemy encounters.

"Well, fatter people can survive for longer, right?"

"Wait, are you assuming we're not going to have any food, either?!"

As they spoke, they noticed a figure approaching them from the darkness. It looked human, or at the very least, not like a monster.

"Is that an Explorer?"

"It looks human, so probably —" Lute's reply cut off as he suddenly went stiff.

"Huh? What's wrong?"

The figure approached. It was a woman. She didn't have wings, or horns,

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or anything strange. She looked perfectly normal. The only thing of note was her long, black hair, reaching down to her feet. Though her voluptuous figure, wrapped in thin cloth, seemed somehow sensual, seeing it made one think a word like “divine” was more appropriate.

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“Lady Mana...what are you doing here?” Lute managed to squeeze out.

“I smelled my brother above, but I just couldn’t bear to wait, so I decided to come up myself!”

“She looks more like a cool-type, but she seems pretty friendly!” Hanakawa remarked.

“What are you, stupid?! Watch your mouth!” Lute finally came to his senses enough to reprimand him.

“Lute, was it? Well, I figured it was something like that.” The woman he had called Mana looked around.

“Master Lute, umm, are you perhaps implying that this woman is...”

“That’s right. The one we came here to find.”

“What? No, she’s supposed to be sealed at the bottom, isn’t she?!”

“I thought the same thing, but...” His companion was completely baffled.

“‘Sealed’ or not, I can go anywhere I want within this place. I can even leave any time I choose,” the Dark God Mana replied, casually flipping everything they believed on its head.

Chapter 20 — Interlude: Why Don’t We Increase the Difficulty, Then?

There was a small mansion set aside in the capital that served as one of the many bases Sion used while operating on the surface. The fact that a Sage used it was kept a secret. There were plenty who would seek a fight against the Sages, after all. Not many would actually pose a threat, but fighting them all the time was still an unnecessary bother.

Deep within that mansion, Sion was relaxing in an extravagantly-decorated room, lying lazily on the sofa. Her attendant, Youichi, was standing in front of her, giving his report.

“The candidates have made their way to the sixth level of the Underworld. At this rate, reaching the seventh level is only a matter of time.”

“I see. Perhaps it was too easy for them.”

Sion hadn’t sent them to repel the invading empire or conquer the Underworld for the good of humanity. The tasks were just things that she’d believed would be nearly impossible for them to manage. Accomplishing their objective in and of itself meant nothing. Even if one of them had the makings of a Sage, their actual abilities were still lacking. They needed more suffering, more desperation. More of an awakening.

“Why don’t we increase the difficulty, then?” she suggested. “Let’s cause them some grief.”

“I don’t think defeating a Dark God is all that easy...” Youichi remarked with a frown. He must have thought she was considering something devious. “Anyway, some of the candidates have already been killed. That itself is nothing strange, of course, but the manner of the deaths are.”

“Go on.”

“They’re now dying in town. And it appears that someone is hunting them. From what I’ve heard, it is one of their classmates, Ayaka Shinozaki. Apparently, she was one of the students left behind on the bus.”

The ones who had been abandoned as dragon bait were those who had

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failed to properly receive the Gift. In order to push the others towards the idea of leaving their unfortunate classmates behind, Sion had personally emphasized that fact.

"So, of the four students left on the bus, three survived? That makes me curious about the last one."

"Yeah, I went to take a look. A male student's body was still there. Just in case, I retrieved the remains and removed the vehicle."

"Hmm. From now on, I suppose I should be more careful with those who fail to receive the Gift." Normally, an installation failure was simply a matter of poor compatibility. A few such candidates popped up each time. Until now, there hadn't been a real issue with ignoring those cases, but given the problems these apparent failures were causing this time around, she would have to be more careful in the future.

"Should we dispose of her?" Youichi asked.

"If she wants revenge against her class, I don't see an issue. That should serve well enough to increase the difficulty for them."

"All right. What have you decided to do about the boy?"

"Truthfully, I'm still not sure..."

Sion had more or less determined where Yogiri Takatou was, and she had a general idea of his abilities from talking to Hanakawa. She had come up with numerous ways of dealing with him, so killing him should have been no problem, but she couldn't help but feel a slight sense of unease. If he wasn't causing any trouble, she figured poking the hornet's nest was a bad idea.

"Him killing Sages doesn't count as causing a disturbance? I don't think we can just let him be."

"But if they were weak enough to be killed, they deserved it, don't you think? If they weren't strong enough to handle him, it was their own fault. And as far as people killing Sages, I feel like the Hedgehog is a bigger concern."

This had all started because of that damn "Hedgehog," a lustrous black figure covered in blades from head to toe. It was the reason the number of Sages had been decreasing, which had led Sion to summon the new candidates in the first place. Almost everything about the creature was still a mystery, so they had plenty of work to do on that front.

As she was thinking things over, a knock sounded. Youichi was immediately suspicious...understandable, since the knock had come from

Sion's empty bedroom.

"Ah, this is the work of a Transporter, isn't it?" Sion mused, motioning for her attendant to open the door.

A young man in a school uniform stepped through.

"You are Haruto Ootori, one of the Sage candidates, right?" Youichi asked, more for Sion's sake. She never bothered to learn their names until it became absolutely necessary.

"I understand how you got here, but how did you *know* to come here?"

The boy's skill allowed the user to connect the doors of any two buildings, but you had to have knowledge of both locations to use it. The existence of Sion's hideout was supposed to be a secret.

"Well, we've run into a bit of an issue, so I tried using my Problem Resolution skill," Haruto answered casually.

"Interesting. So, a Consultant is capable of such things once his skill reaches Rank Four. It almost feels like cheating."

While she didn't remember their names, Sion could easily tell their classes just by looking at them. As the name suggested, the Problem Resolution skill taught the user how to solve any issue they were facing. The General class had a similar skill, but it was limited to combat applications. The Problem Resolution skill provided answers for a much broader range of situations.

Although Sion had been the one to install the Gift in them, she had no way of knowing what sort of classes they would ultimately receive. The potential of the Consultant class was also an unknown. But that was exactly what she expected of a candidate; someone who could only operate within the scope of common knowledge would never qualify to become a Sage.

"Well then, how can I help you?"

"If I may be frank, we don't have enough time. I've come to ask if we can have an extension on our deadline."

Sion had given them a time limit of one month to complete their objectives — the amount of time allotted for at least one of them to become proper Sages.

"Ah, well. The time limit was simply to encourage you to work hard, so if you're still aiming to become Sages, I don't particularly mind." The main thing she had wanted to avoid was them becoming complacent and idling their days away. She never had any intention of cutting them off if they were making an earnest effort.

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“Then...”

“But just extending the time limit is a little boring, don’t you think? It would be a bit of a pain if you thought things were that easy. Ah, I have an idea. Can you get rid of Yogiri Takatou for me?”

“Takatou?” Haruto echoed, clearly surprised. Though calm and collected as ever, he was clearly suspicious.

“Are you saying you won’t betray your classmate?”

“No, we’ve already cut him off once. He doesn’t seem particularly useful, so I have no problem with doing so again, but...”

“You’re wondering if doing something that simple is sufficient to earn an extension.”

“Exactly.”

“It won’t be that easy, you see...”

Sion proceeded to tell him everything she had learned about Yogiri Takatou so far.

“So, normal methods of trying to kill him will result in us dying, then.”

“Do you think you can do it?”

Whether they actually succeeded or not, she wanted to see him try. She was looking forward to finding out what his Problem Resolution skill would come up with. Using it, they might finally be able to figure out how to deal with Yogiri.

“Understood. We’ll give it a shot,” Haruto agreed.

He seemed to show no signs of being afraid. Apparently, he felt the task would be possible.

MY INSTANT DEATH ABILITY IS SO OVERPOWERED, NOTHING IN THIS OTHER WORLD STANDS A CHANCE AGAINST ME!

Side Story

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Side Story: The Judge

In the depths of the mountains, there was a village not marked on any map. A certain group was responsible for keeping the area under surveillance. They didn't know why; all they had been told was to stop anyone who tried to cross the boundary.

The village itself had generated a level of curiosity, so from time to time, people would try to sneak in. When they were discovered, they would politely be informed that the area was strictly off limits and sent back the way they came. Every once in a while someone would manage to make it through the blockade, in which case the guards were instructed not to pursue them past the border. What happened to those who made it to the village, though? Up until now, not a single one of them had ever returned.

Of course, those who were born and lived there weren't prevented from coming and going. Though somewhat anachronistic, the village itself had a checkpoint barring entry and exit. Only those who lived within were permitted to pass through it.

The people of the village always used that one entrance, so the security detail only had to patrol their normal route, looking for people trying to sneak in from the outside. A number of sensors had been placed outside the patrol's route as well, to detect potential trespassers. In effect, the interior of the security perimeter was *not* under surveillance.

So when the guard first heard a noise, he merely wrote it off as the sound of an animal moving through the undergrowth. It wasn't a particularly rare occurrence. That being said, something like a wild boar was still plenty dangerous, so he turned to take a look.

He was immediately surprised by what he saw. The source of the noise was a young boy in a white robe, covered in blood. His first instinct was to call out to the boy, but the child's expression made him pause.

The young stranger walked forward aimlessly, hollow eyes not focusing on anything. The guard soon remembered that there were no children in the village — not a single person under the age of twenty was on the list.

The man recovered quickly, calling out, “Hey, where did you come from? Are you hurt?”

He must have felt from the boy’s appearance that something had happened. And it was just a small boy; he couldn’t leave him out in the wilderness alone.

Suddenly, the guard collapsed. As far as the records indicated, he was the first victim.

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“This is a video of the event. The guard had a camera on his helmet, which recorded the whole thing.”

The speaker was the researcher Shiraishi, as he showed the video to Asaka Takatou in a conference room at the facility. Thanks to the overgrown nature of the forest, it was hard to tell what time of day the video had been taken at, but the clock at the bottom right of the screen showed that it had been around noon. While it was a little dark, the quality of the camera was quite high, so even small details were visible.

“So, the video doesn’t actually show him? Well, not like I want to see any more, anyway.”

It was supposed to be a recording of Yogiri Takatou, codenamed ΑΩ, but the boy himself couldn’t be seen on the screen. Instead, a blurry mosaic had taken his place, making him barely distinguishable as a human being. Something had appeared from the brush, the camera had fallen over, then the figure had wandered away. That’s all the footage showed.

“Unfortunately, we don’t have the original anymore.”

“And that’s not about protecting his personal information, right? This is an evil research lab, after all.”

“Come on now, are you still on about that?”

“The amount of illegal activity here boggles the mind. I can’t tell my parents anything about this place, and the fact that I get paid in cash is pretty strange.”

Asaka primarily lived underground, and on the rare occasion she made it to the outside world, she had to worry about being abducted by other organizations. Her workplace was full of strange complications. The only upside was her relatively high salary, but even that was high enough to make

her uneasy.

"That's because we're working hard to prevent the end of the world here. Anyway, of course information about him is top secret, but that's not why the video was altered."

For those who knew of Yogiri's power, any information they could acquire about him was worth its weight in gold. They'd be willing to pay anything to obtain even the vaguest details.

"Then why?"

"Because anyone who watched it died."

Asaka blinked dumbly. "What?"

"Just what I said. Everyone who watched the original video died, no exceptions."

"Are you serious?"

"I'm pretty sure I haven't lied to you yet. It was quite a disaster, honestly. Well, given what happened afterwards, it kind of fell off the radar a bit."

"Um, I don't understand what you're saying. I know he's got an unbelievable ability, but like, this is just a picture, right?" Yogiri could kill anyone by thinking it, but that was a far cry from killing everyone who saw a video of him.

"The camera captured the moment his power activated. His mind was likely fairly hazy, so he was probably just targeting anyone looking at him. At least that's our theory so far."

"So, what, he can kill people even if it's not in real time?!"

"We're deep into the occult now, aren't we? It's like a cursed video," Shiraishi said, apparently amused by the whole ordeal.

"Hey, don't say it like you're having so much fun."

"I tried a bit of an experiment. Even when we copied it over to another disc or reduced the visual quality, it still worked."

"And you wonder why I call this an evil organization." Strictly for the sake of his experiment, he had shown the video to others, knowing the risk. And thanks to that, a considerable number of people had died. They didn't put any value on human life here at all, Asaka knew.

"Regardless of your feelings, as I've said before, this facility was created to develop a weapon."

Asaka recalled their conversation from her first day on the job, where she'd been told that they were developing a weapon to defend against the

threat of nuclear arms.

"In this case, anyone who saw him activate his power was killed," Shiraishi continued. "Even those who had no idea about AΩ's existence were affected by it the moment they saw the video. We tried distorting it to differing degrees, but people only stopped dying once he became entirely unrecognizable."

"But how did you even edit it in the first place? Wouldn't anyone who looked at it to make those edits suffer the same fate?"

"Automatically altering a video to blur a human figure isn't difficult. But the more you think about it, the more interesting it gets. Basically, what determines whether you live or die is whether you recognize what you're seeing or not. Also fascinating is that animals with no ability to distinguish between individual humans were unharmed as well."

"But how would such a thing kill you? Although, now that I say it, I don't understand how he kills people with his thoughts, either."

"The fact that his power relies on the recognition of the target means *something* is determining who has actually become aware of him. That means there's something out there that can peek into the minds of humans, which is getting close to omniscience. So we wondered, rather than something purely mechanical like a computer program meant to alter the video, what about a higher level AI? Would that be killed as well?"

"Don't tell me you kept up this 'research'?"

"No, we were told to put a stop to it. The original video has been destroyed."

"Well, good, it was a dangerous thing."

"Yes, it was. If it were broadcast over the airwaves, it would be the end of Japan. If it were uploaded to the internet, it could well be the end of the world."

Asaka was at a loss for words. The world seemed an awful lot more fragile than she'd imagined. It would take barely anything at all from this boy to put an end to it.

"Ultimately, the higher-ups decided it was too dangerous to use even as a weapon, so they shut it down."

"Yeah, anyone sane would come to that conclusion. Or...well, I guess that's not really true." The Agency, which had previously kidnapped Asaka, must have been unaware of the true threat that Yogiri posed. If they had

known, they wouldn't have been nearly so reckless.

"That's right. We don't know how much external groups like the Agency know about him, but at the very least, they seem to think they can keep him contained and make use of him. Either that, or they believe he's too dangerous to leave it up to Japan to handle."

"Why don't you just share information about him? If the public knew, they'd panic, but you could at least tell the relevant agencies of other countries."

"Unfortunately, that wouldn't work. It's hard enough to believe it when it's happening right in front of you, let alone from a written report. Either they wouldn't believe us, or they'd interpret it in whatever way suited them best."

"And that whole incident with the guard is why no video or sound recordings are allowed now, I guess."

The staff were strictly forbidden from making any type of recording, and the underground facility didn't have any internet or telephone lines. The entrance had a camera, but that had been disabled now as well. It had previously functioned by altering the recordings in real time, but even then it had offered a pathway for Yogiri to escape to the surface, and therefore had to be disposed of.

"So, what? Did you call me here just to show me this video?" Every month, Asaka went up to the surface to make her report, but she had done her monthly check-in just the other day.

"Ah, yes, about that. We were worried that, since you have grown so used to your job here, you may have started taking the threat ΑΩ poses too lightly. We wanted to give you a bit of a warning."

"I don't think I'm taking him lightly. But there's nothing to be gained by treating him like a time bomb, either."

"Well, in that regard, you're certainly doing well. We have no complaints, so please continue operating just as you have been."

Of course Yogiri's ability was terrifying, but being scared of him accomplished nothing. It wasn't like he had asked for his power, so she felt bad about seeing him treated that way.

"Then, on to the main topic."

"Wait, hold on. What happened after Yogiri left the village in that video?"

"Ah, that's kind of a long story, so let's save it for next time."

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“Oh, come on!” *Why was he covered in blood? Why did he leave in the first place? Where did he go? And how did they get a boy who killed everyone who looked at him back underground?* Asaka couldn’t help being curious, but Shiraishi’s apologetic smile made it clear that he wasn’t planning on saying more. “Fine. So, what is it, then?”

“Actually, we’re going to have a visitor to the underground facility.”

“A visitor? You mean someone who isn’t staff?”

While Asaka wasn’t aware of how the underground part of the facility was dealt with on the outside, its primary purpose was to isolate Yogiri. There was no way having visitors was a normal, acceptable occurrence, so she couldn’t help but feel that any such visitors should be rejected with maximum force.

“You don’t plan on doing anything to Yogiri, do you?”

“No, no, no! Not at all! We have no plan to do anything to him, and even if we did, it would probably mean the end of the world. Even if we were given such orders, we would likely hole up inside the facility and protect him instead.”

He spoke as if he were joking, but it felt like he was telling the truth. Even if disobeying orders threatened their jobs or their lives, it didn’t mean much if obeying them meant the human race would be wiped out. In that scenario, being on Yogiri’s side was the best chance they had.

“The guest has nothing at all to do with ΑΩ.”

“Then why not send them somewhere else? I don’t like to say it, but you could just tell them the underground is too dangerous, couldn’t you?”

“Well, the thing is, this isn’t a request we can deny.”

“What are you talking about? This is a government organization, isn’t it? This place is super important, right?”

“Well, how do I put it? It’s a request from someone who’s basically the current ruler of Japan.”

“You mean the Prime Minister?” His roundabout wording made it hard to understand. As a democratic state, there wasn’t really someone you would refer to as a “ruler” of the country.

“There’s an organization that has considerable control over Japan from behind the scenes, and the request is from their leader.”

“I’m not sure you could possibly make it sound shadier!”

“Yes, well...strange as it is, as long as we operate in Japan, we can’t stand

against them. But please relax. Like I said, this has nothing to do with AΩ himself. They just wanted a place where they could be sure that no one would interfere."

"And they couldn't find somewhere else to go?"

"This is the most carefully guarded place in the nation, after all."

"Do they understand how dangerous he is?"

"They've been given the information, at least. But the fact that they are so insistent on using this facility means they probably don't take it seriously. In any case, we've been saddled with the job, so we'll just have to deal with it."

"So, what should I do?"

"Oh, there's nothing in particular for you to do. They'll just be staying at the facility for a while. I figured you'd be shocked if they showed up out of nowhere, so I thought it was best to warn you beforehand. We've told them explicitly to stay away from anyone they meet underground."

"Aren't you worried someone might use it as a chance to slip in? Something followed me when I went down there the first time, remember?"

If someone was targeting Yogiri, a new group's arrival would be the perfect opportunity for them to attempt to infiltrate the underground region. Some sort of mysterious creature had hidden in Asaka's shadow the first time she'd been admitted.

"This is their specialty, so it should be fine. If they were that susceptible to infiltration, they wouldn't need such an isolated location in the first place. I'm sure the lord will have taken plenty of precautions beforehand."

"The lord...? Someone with a name like that in present-day Japan is even more concerning..."

Was this really going to work out? Asaka wasn't so sure.

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When Asaka made her way back to the underground mansion, she found Yogiri playing fetch outside with Nikori, their Shetland Sheepdog. Nikori was a very smart dog, so she had picked up the game right away. As Asaka entered the yard, she called out to them, prompting the two to run towards her.

"Welcome home, Asaka!" Recently, Yogiri had begun wearing a T-shirt and shorts instead of his usual outfit. Asaka had thought it best that he get

used to wearing more ordinary clothing.

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“I’m home. I assume everything’s about the same?”

“Yeah.” Her meeting hadn’t been all that long, but it was about an hour’s travel time between the surface and their home. If it wasn’t for anything important, she would rather they didn’t call her up there at all. “No souvenirs?”

“Sorry, all I did was go upstairs this time. Oh, I do have some chocolate I picked up on the way. It’s about three now, so do you feel like a snack?”

As she spoke, Asaka pulled out the chocolate she had in her bag. The bag was a Birkin by Hermès. It had been left behind when she’d been kidnapped from her hotel, but she had managed to get it back safe and sound in the end.

“Okay!”

“You can’t give any to Nikori, though.”

“Why?”

“I’m pretty sure dogs can’t eat chocolate. It’s probably in the book we have on raising dogs, so go take a look.”

“Okay.”

Yogiri took the chocolate and ran off into the mansion without complaint. Asaka followed him at a more leisurely pace. When she made her way into the living room, Yogiri was sitting politely at the table, chocolate covering his face. She took a seat across from him.

“I have something to talk about, is that okay?”

“What is it?”

“Tomorrow, some people will be coming down here. There are those empty houses in the village, you know? They’ll be using those, so I doubt we’ll even run into them, but please be careful.” She paused suddenly, thinking about it. “Or...well, what are we actually being careful of?”

Although they were underground, the area was supposed to be a recreation of an actual village somewhere. The house they lived in was in the middle of a forest on the outskirts of that village. The houses within the village were all empty, so any guests who visited would stay there. As long as they remained in the mansion, they wouldn’t have any contact with those who were visiting the village.

“Is someone moving in?”

“They’re just staying for a little while. About one week, I think. So try to stay away from the village while they’re there...although, should we even bother?”

Asaka began to doubt whether she should really be going out of her way to make accommodations for them. She had no idea why they were coming in the first place, so she didn't know what to be careful of.

"Well, whatever. You can just do what you usually do. You don't normally go that far anyway, right? I don't think they'll come all the way here, either."

"Yeah, okay." Yogiri seemed curious, but if she told him not to, he wouldn't go out of his way to visit them. He almost always did exactly as she asked.

After finishing their snack, she had him begin his studies. Having finished the elementary school curriculum, she had started him on materials aimed at middle-schoolers. Asaka had plenty of doubts about her ability to teach at that level, so she was studying right alongside him.

After a while, they began their preparations for dinner. Yogiri had recently begun helping her as well.

"Am I doing enough here?" she murmured to herself while they cooked.

"What?"

"I figured I don't do all that much work down here, so I was wondering if it's really acceptable for me to be paid so much."

She had always assumed that "work" would be more complicated and annoying. And although she had certainly been confused by her job at the start, once she had gotten used to it, her routine was basically just living out an ordinary daily life. At this rate, even her part-time job in college had been harder work.

"What do you mean, work?" Yogiri gave her a blank look.

"Hmm, well, work is work, but it's also kind of not."

Not sure how to describe it, she decided not to bother. And really, considering her job required her to be locked underground twenty-four hours a day, and always had the threat of her own death hanging overhead, maybe the salary wasn't unreasonable.

Asaka brought the completed meal out to the dining table. Unlike her predecessor, she always ate with Yogiri.

"It's delicious," the boy commented as they began digging in.

"Well, I feel like I've gotten a lot better, but I'm not sure this is good enough yet." All she had done was cut up the meat and vegetables and cook them in a dipping sauce, so it wasn't an especially impressive meal. If it

tasted good, that was fine, but she felt like relying entirely on the sauce to add flavor to the meal was a form of defeat. “We can get any ingredients we want down here, so I feel like there’s something more I should be able to do.”

“I like your cooking, though,” Yogiri said as Asaka aired her doubts. He seemed to be trying to make her feel better.

Once they finished eating and cleaned everything up, they started getting ready for bed. Letting Nikori inside, they began closing up the mansion for the night. It was important to have the entire building totally sealed off. Moving the dining table out of the way, they set their futons out in the living room. Though there were plenty of rooms in the house, that was where they spent most of their time.

Once their preparations were done, Yogiri got into his futon right away. As Nikori lay down beside him, Asaka took a seat nearby. After exchanging goodnights, the boy fell asleep almost instantly.

While Yogiri could drift off incredibly fast, Asaka had a much more difficult time going to sleep this early, so she typically stayed up a while longer.

As the sun set, apparitions began wandering around outside.

“I wonder what they’re going to do about those things outside at night?”

As strange as it was, despite being underground, they still experienced weather and even had a sun that rose and set. Every night, shadows that looked like people appeared. She didn’t know what would happen if a person was caught by them, but she had a feeling it would be nothing good.

“Maybe I’ll pay them a visit tomorrow,” she mused.

Asaka had grown accustomed to the shadowy figures by now, but if you didn’t know to expect them, it would be a disconcerting discovery that could well put the lives of the newcomers in danger. She had been told not to interact with them, but it was probably best to at least let them know that much.

She decided to go over and speak to them when they arrived the next day.

◇ ◇ ◇

After breakfast, Asaka had Yogiri begin studying on his own before she left the house. Putting the forest behind her, she walked through the rice fields towards the empty village, but the only people she found there were the

androids. They were all doing miscellaneous work, from tending the fields to maintaining the empty houses.

"We've got some visitors coming," Asaka called out to a nearby robot. "Do you know when?"

"We have not heard any such thing."

"Oh, really?"

The robots spoke fairly well, so communicating normally with them was easy. Their speech was a bit stilted due to their lack of consciousness, but they were clearly built with high-level technology.

"I am told they are to arrive before noon," another robot interjected.

The androids weren't connected to any kind of network, nor did they have any general-purpose interface. The only way to give them information was to tell them directly, so sometimes there was a delay in that information being spread. This was yet another measure to keep information about AΩ from leaking out.

"I see. Maybe I should take a look at the entrance, then."

"They will likely be using the freight entrance."

"Wait, we have one of those?"

"Yes. It is a little off from the staff road."

"I guess I'll go take a look."

But before she had the chance to leave, a number of large trucks came into view. The vehicles drove single file into the village, stopping in front of Asaka. In short order, people hopped out and began unloading large amounts of luggage.

"Huh? Hold on, is this really that big of a deal?"

The more luggage she saw come out of the trucks, the more Asaka's surprise deepened. After a while, an expensive-looking black car arrived. The door swung open vigorously and a red flash flew out from inside.

"Ahh! Jeez! I don't believe this! After such a cool sci-fi-like elevator, we end up in this place? It's just a countryside village!"

The rambling came from a young girl in a red, frilled dress, wearing long gloves that went up past her elbows. The weather wasn't that cold yet, so either they were meant to protect her from the sun or were strictly for fashion.

After her, three men in black suits stepped out of the vehicle. One was a young man wearing glasses, the second was a huge guy who looked like he could barely fit his muscles into the suit, and the third had an aura of being

anything but an upstanding individual.

Asaka decided to talk to the guy in the glasses. It was entirely prejudiced on her part, but she felt he would be the easiest to speak with.

"Umm, hello."

The moment they heard her voice, the three men surrounded her. "Don't talk to us, bitch! Get any closer and we'll kill you!"

Asaka went stiff at the unexpected threat.

"Sorry, lady," the girl in red piped up. "Takaoka doesn't really mean any harm."

"Mistress, please don't speak to strangers like that. She may well be an enemy!" At some point, "Takaoka" had pulled out a pistol, pointing it at Asaka, who immediately put her hands up, the realization that they were all Yakuza finally hitting her.

"She was down here before we were, right?"

"But after our week is done, we need to silence anyone suspicious —"

"Takaoka, could you stop being such a scaredy-cat? It's annoying."

"My apologies." In spite of the man's words, he didn't lower his gun.

"Umm, well," Asaka said, "I just wanted to say that it's dangerous here at night, so make sure you shut the doors tight when it gets dark. That's all, so can I go now? I have no intention of getting involved with you."

"Good, get out of here."

With her hands still in the air, Asaka backed away for a short while before turning around and running. Once she had gotten far enough that she couldn't see them anymore, she stopped to catch her breath.

"I thought it was odd for them to go through the trouble of coming to a place like this, but this is too much..."

That must have been why they'd said not to get close to the outsiders. Asaka regretted going out of her way to give them the warning.

"Well, do what you want, then!" Recovering her nerve, she trudged back home.

◇ ◇ ◇

Asaka, Yogiri, and Nikori were all at the freight entrance. Asaka had wanted to go and take a look at this entrance she hadn't even known about, and since they usually took Nikori for a walk after lunch, they decided to all

go together.

“It looks like a launching place for robots...” Asaka looked up, but she couldn’t see all the way up to the ceiling. There were lights here and there, but they only illuminated the immediate area, so most of the place was shrouded in darkness.

The entrance was a cylindrical tube reinforced by concrete, connecting to the spherical space the village resided in. Rails built into the walls made it clear that it was intended to be a lift of some sort, with the elevator currently being stopped at the bottom level. It was big enough to carry a number of large trucks all at once.

“It’s really big, isn’t it?” Yogiri was completely taken in by his first time seeing such a large structure.

“Well, without an elevator like this, you could hardly create a village down here, could you?”

But even knowing how they got their supplies, it only raised the question of how the elevator and the space for the village had been created in the first place. “Doesn’t this look a lot more convenient, though?”

The normal staff entrance required a lot of walking. If this entrance connected directly to the surface, it was probably much faster to use.

“I doubt it,” a voice called from behind them, prompting the two to turn around. “We had to change elevators a lot.”

Standing there was the girl Asaka had seen in the village. She looked to be about Yogiri’s age.

“Who are you?” he asked immediately.

“Shouldn’t you introduce yourself first in a situation like this?”

“I’m Yogiri Takatou. This is Asaka.”

“Hm, what a weird name. My name is Enju Sumeragi. I’ll only be here for a short while, but let’s get along.”

Asaka wanted to point out the oddness of the girl’s own name but figured that, as an adult, she should probably refrain from petty snipes.

Yogiri stepped up to Enju and held out a hand. He had recently been taught about shaking hands as a greeting, so he was no doubt trying to put it into practice.

“Ah, sorry. I know I’m so cute you want to touch me, but if you do, you’ll die,” Enju said, waving a gloved hand.

“Really?”

“Really. Even beautiful flowers have their thorns or poison. I’m like that. I wear gloves, so things are generally okay, but I try to avoid touching people as much as I can.” She may have been exaggerating, but Yogiri seemed to take her at her word.

“Hey, I wanted to ask you some things, is that okay?” Asaka asked.

“What’s up?”

“Wow, so casual considering we’ve just met. Well, that’s fine. You had some people with you earlier. Is it all right for you to be here on your own?”

“If those gross guys were hanging around me every minute of the day, I wouldn’t be able to breathe. So I shook them off for a bit. I was walking through the village, but there was nothing to do there. I saw you guys heading this way, so I decided to come and see what you were up to.”

“So, they’re probably desperately searching for you right now, aren’t they?”

“Probably.”

Asaka had a bad feeling about that. The problem was that she had Yogiri with her. If those guys showed up and gave off even the slightest bit of hostility, people would start dying.

“Umm, I kind of want to avoid meeting them.”

“Sorry if they scared you earlier, but don’t worry. They’ll do whatever I tell them.”

“Yogiri,” Asaka whispered.

“What is it?” Yogiri leaned in, excited, thinking she was going to tell him a secret.

“This girl’s friends might come find us at some point. Even if they do or say things that are really rude, try to be patient with them, okay?”

“I don’t get it, but okay.” His response was rather worrying, but that was the best she could do for now.

Asaka turned back to Enju. “So, we were told not to get involved with you at all. Did they not tell you the same thing?”

“They did, but that would be boring.”

“Boring, huh? I don’t know why you’re here, but you’re supposed to be hiding, aren’t you?”

“This is the safest place in the world, right? There’s no point trying to be sneaky down here.”

“Well...there aren’t many people who make it down here, but...” Enju was

technically right. If whatever was threatening her was outside this place, she would be safe. The underground facility was completely cut off from the rest of the world.

"Mistress!" As she was wondering what to do with this girl, a man in a suit came running over. It was the man with the glasses, who Enju had called Takaoka. He immediately flew into a rage upon seeing them. "You bitch! I told you to stay away from her!"

This time, however, Asaka could only feel angry at how quickly he flew off the handle. "She came to see us all on her own. If that's a problem for you, then you deal with it. All right, Enju. I know it's boring, but if you walk around like this, it'll be an issue for us as well. So could you please try to behave?"

"Hey, you!"

"Takaoka!" Enju shouted, stopping the man as he reached for his gun again. "Yeah, hiding like that just doesn't suit me. Let's go, Takaoka." Taking her bodyguard with her, Enju left the freight elevator behind.

"Seems like this is going to be a long week..." Asaka murmured.

Things had gotten exciting already, and it was only the first day.

The next morning, as Asaka watched Yogiri playing in the rice paddies, Enju came to visit again. Takaoka had come with her this time, but he kept his distance, staying at the edge of the water.

"What are you doing?" Enju asked, watching Yogiri sticking a bug net into the water over and over.

"I'm trying to catch those clear green things," he answered.

As Yogiri chased the fairy shrimp around the paddy, Asaka sat there watching him idly.

"Is it fun? It looks totally boring," Enju commented as she took a seat beside Asaka. She was wearing the same red dress and gloves as the day before, but she didn't seem the least bit concerned about getting her clothes dirty. Asaka, on the other hand, was wearing a tracksuit specifically so that she didn't have to worry about the mud.

"So, you two came to an agreement?" Asaka asked.

"Something like that. We've decided at least one of them will come with me everywhere, but they'll stay a little farther away. I also told them not to mess with you two."

"Well, there's no one here but us, so there isn't much to be on guard

against. By the way, how was last night? Things seemed rather noisy."

When darkness had fallen, Asaka had heard the sound of gunfire. The village was quiet otherwise, and sounds traveled quite far.

"I wanted to see what was going to pop up."

"Really? Are you guys okay?"

"I guess. For hollow people like that, I can deal with them myself. With Takaoka and the others there, beating them was easy. No point in fighting for no reason, though, so tonight we'll close up tight."

Asaka had been terrified the first time she'd seen those black shadows appear, but Enju didn't seem particularly bothered by them. Asaka's first impression of her being a tough kid was an accurate one.

"Hey, isn't there anything fun to do here?" Enju asked.

"Unfortunately, things are exactly what they seem here. If you want to have fun, you have to make it yourself."

"What is this place, anyway? Grandfather said it was the safest place in the world, so is it some kind of shelter?"

"Now that you mention it, it does sort of seem like one, doesn't it?"

Even if the surface was engulfed by nuclear war, the underground facility would likely remain safe. They would be entirely self-sufficient, and the space was large enough for them to spend an extended period of time cut off without feeling claustrophobic.

But in reality, it was the exact opposite of a shelter. Rather than a place to run to, it was a prison designed to keep someone from running away at all costs. Not that Yogiri would have considered the place a prison. As he had demonstrated, he could leave any time the mood struck him.

"So, why did you walk over here?" Asaka asked. "You knew we wouldn't be doing anything interesting, right?"

"Just satisfying my curiosity. But who are you guys? Isn't it kind of weird for you to be living down here?"

Asaka had no doubt that the answers to those questions would sate the girl's curiosity. The truth would be so unexpectedly absurd that it would certainly keep her entertained.

"Uh, didn't they tell you not to get involved with us?"

"Right, so you want me to explain my situation first?"

"Definitely not. It'll only cause trouble for us if we know about you, so please spare me." Asaka snuck a glance to the side. Takaoka was glaring at

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her with a terrifying expression.

"Hey, is Yogiri also an Adjudicator?"

Asaka could only tilt her head in confusion at the unfamiliar term. She had never heard Yogiri referred to that way.

"Guess not. I thought I'd surprise it out of you, but judging by your response, you don't even know what that is."

As if that was all she had to say, Enju stood up. Then she suddenly jumped into the water, splashing mud all over Yogiri.

"Ahahaha! Did I surprise you?"

"Yeah," Yogiri replied, staring back at her in shock.

"It looks like you haven't been able to catch anything. Here, let me try."

"Okay."

"Wait, don't get any closer. Just throw it to me. I told you you can't touch me, right?" Yogiri tossed her the bug net, which Enju immediately used to begin wreaking havoc across the rice paddy. "Hey, how old are you, Yogiri?"

"I don't know."

Enju stopped for a moment, taken aback by the unexpected answer. "Well, I'm ten, and I'm in Grade Five. It looks like there's a small school here, so what grade are you in?"

"I don't go there. Asaka teaches me."

"Oh. Well, okay. You look about the same as me, or maybe younger, so I'll make you one of my lackeys."

"Really?!"

"Do you realize what that means? As my lackey, I'm your boss. You have to do everything I say."

"Okay."

"In that case, we're done here. It was a little fun, but I'm bored of it!" As she said that, she dumped a number of aquatic creatures she had caught in the net into the bucket.

"So, what should we do now?" Yogiri asked.

"Don't you have any ideas? Something that doesn't make us look like country bumpkins?"

"Oh, how about video games? Asaka, can we?"

"Sure." They had plenty of games in the mansion, but he wasn't allowed to play them without permission.

"Video games? Grandfather always stopped me from playing them

before...but I guess he can't stop me all the way down here!"

With that, Yogiri and Enju ran off to the mansion. Standing up with a stretch, Asaka looked over to see how Takaoka would react.

He was sprinting after Enju like his life depended on it.

◇ ◇ ◇

In what seemed like no time at all, a week had passed.

She had been told not to get involved with the people living underground, but just sitting around in an empty house all day was too much for Enju. After making Yogiri her lackey, she brought him around everywhere while she played, enjoying her time there to the fullest. And Yogiri did everything she said, just as he'd promised.

"This is a super big secret, but I'll tell you, okay? Anything I touch dies. That includes you. So no matter how attractive I am, you can't touch me, okay?"

"Yeah, I understand."

"Do you? You'll die if you touch me."

"Yeah, I get it. If I touch you, I'll die."

He didn't doubt her, nor was he afraid, nor did he pity her. Yogiri just accepted the revelation as it was. He didn't give the slightest impression of being cautious around her. It was the first time someone had treated her normally since her power had awakened. So she had asked why *he* was down here.

"Well, I was always here."

He genuinely didn't seem to know. But Enju was well aware of how strange it was for a child to be locked up in a place like this, cared for primarily by robots. Then again, she didn't really care. For her, someone who would treat her like a friend after learning about her power was precious. She didn't want to risk threatening that by overstepping her bounds with him.

Not that their friendship would continue, she supposed. Enju was now sitting in the house she had been staying in, surrounded by Takaoka and the rest of her bodyguards. It was only a few minutes from midnight. The deadline was getting close.

The tension of the guards around her was thick enough to be almost visible. If a harmless mouse had wandered into her room at that moment, it

would have been instantly obliterated. Everything had led up to this day, this moment. That's why she had been given relative freedom up until then.

A while back, a being that called itself the Judge had appeared around the world, giving its message to the people it met. "Humanity is unnecessary. I considered wiping it out but have decided to give you one last chance to save it."

One year prior, Enju had met this being.

An ominous chiming came from the clock on the wall. The tension in the room spiked and everyone went on high alert as the distorted sound of the bell announced midnight.

Then, silence.

"We did it..." someone whispered. The tension didn't dissipate, but the feeling of having weathered the peak of the storm began to set in.

Then a black line appeared. Passing between the guards, it went right by Enju's side. As they watched, it grew into a circle.

Enju's bodyguards immediately attacked. They had been ready for an assault, so they didn't hesitate for an instant. Consecrated bullets and blessed blades rained down on the thing that tried to appear beside the girl, but they didn't so much as slow it down. Bullets struck the arms and legs that appeared, but to no avail, passing through harmlessly.

Pulling Enju back, her bodyguards positioned themselves between her and the black ellipse as a person slowly rose up out of it. It was a boy wearing a robe made from a single piece of white cloth, styled as if he were some sort of holy person.

"Come on, stop wasting your time." The being who had appeared a year ago, calling itself the Judge, now looked down on Enju with disappointment. "No matter how much you attack me, it won't hurt, but it'll be hard to talk with all that noise around us. I'm going to have to ask you to stop."

The moment he said those words, Enju's bodyguards froze in place, unable to move.

"It was quite difficult getting here. I never thought something could block my way like that. It was only for a few seconds, but it did manage to stop me. Whoever made this place must be quite impressive."

Enju threw a fist at him, but her hand just passed through, with the sensation of having punched into a tub of lukewarm water.

"There's no way a human's power would work on me," the boy said

nonchalantly as she pulled her hand back forcefully enough to fall onto the floor. “Now then, everyone has quieted down, so why don’t we talk?”

Although he phrased it as a question, he didn’t wait for a response, launching immediately into the conversation.

“I asked you guys as Adjudicators whether humanity should be destroyed. I divided you into ‘preserve’ and ‘destroy’ teams, and figured I’d follow the decision of whichever group had the most members alive at the end. But come on, you must have known what I meant, right? Hiding yourselves away like this doesn’t count. You were supposed to think of a way to make humanity survive yourself.”

“But if both teams were alive at the end, it would be a draw, right?!”

For the past year, Enju had been running all over the world, trying to keep herself hidden. Her team simply needed to win in the meantime. At least, that’s what their plan had been, but shortly before the year was up, Enju had become the last surviving member of the “preserve” faction. From the beginning, the “destroy” faction had been much larger, so fighting them had been an almost impossible task. As the only one left, it was natural that she would be overwhelmed, so she had run away and planned to temporarily disappear.

“Did I say something like that? Maybe I did, but that would only apply if everything was somehow still undecided after a hellish battle. Did you really think I’d roll over so easily and give you the win if you tried to outsmart me and game the system? The ‘destroy’ team did everything they could to infiltrate this place. They pushed themselves to the breaking point, to the point where they were throwing up blood. Don’t you feel bad for them?”

Enju stayed silent. She was desperately trying to think of a way out of this, but there was no way a ten-year-old girl could stand up to such a monster.

“I suppose it’s partly my fault for not making myself clear at the start, so I guess I’ll give you one more chance.”

“A chance?”

“The same as before. I’ll split everyone here into ‘destroy’ and ‘preserve’ factions, and I’ll decide based on whoever wins.”

“What do you mean? There’s no one here who would want to destroy humanity!”

“Maybe, but we still need a way to handle this. So this is how we’re going

to do it."

As he spoke, the Judge gently stroked the head of one of her bodyguards. At his touch, the man's head exploded, the rest of his body slumping to the floor. A dull light filtered out from his corpse, creating a red "X" in the air above him.

"This is the symbol of the 'preserve' team. It basically means 'wrong.' If a 'destroy' team member is killed, it'll show a circle. There's only one of them, so you'll need to find and kill them. It'll be a pain if it takes too long, so your time limit is one hour. If the 'destroy' team member is still alive by then, I'll wipe out humanity."

"W-Wait! I can't do something like that!"

"Then feel free to relax for your last hour on Earth. Okay, starting now."

The moment the words left his mouth, the guards finally found they could move again.

"You bastard!"

"I'll kill you!"

They opened fire, but just as before, their bullets passed harmlessly through the Judge, leaving nothing but ripples in their wake.

"There's no point, stop it!" Takaoka shouted.

The Judge didn't move, apparently planning to stay and watch.

"Wh-What do we do, Takaoka?! This wasn't how it was supposed to go!" Feeling crushed by the weight of her anxiety, Enju clung to her bodyguard.

"First, there's something we have to test."

There was a cold look in his eyes. Enju had a bad feeling about it, but there was nothing she could do.

◇ ◇ ◇

Asaka awoke to the sound of gunfire filling the air. There seemed to be some sort of combat going on, and it was slowly drawing closer.

"Well, it must be those guys..." She couldn't imagine it was anyone else, given they were the only ones in the village, but that didn't exactly tell her what was going on. "Yogiri, wake up."

Yogiri sat up immediately, rubbing his eyes. Both of them were still in their pajamas, half asleep. "What is it?"

"Something's wrong. There are gunshots outside."

“Oh, you’re right. Is that a machine gun?” Maybe it was bad for his development, but Yogiri had taken quite a liking to shooter games.

“I don’t want to get involved, but it might be our guests. It seems like they’re fighting the shadow people on their way here.”

“What should we do?”

“Is there somewhere we can hide?”

“Why?” Yogiri asked, as if running away was the strangest idea in the world.

“Well, if at all possible, I don’t want you to kill them. We don’t even know what’s happening yet.”

There was always the possibility the others had run into some sort of trouble and were heading to the estate for help. They had come to the underground village to hide from someone, after all. If whoever they were running from had followed them down here, she didn’t want to just leave them to their fate.

“Okay. But I don’t know where we’d go, either.”

“Maybe there was something in my handbook.”

Asaka retrieved her work manual, looking for instructions to follow in case of an emergency. There was no evacuation plan listed, but it did mention an emergency distress beacon under the kitchen floor.

After a brief search, she located the device in a section of the room she had previously written off as storage. Opening the lid, there was a red button enclosed by a glass cover.

“They actually have something like this? It looks like a self-destruct button.”

The instructions written beside it were to smash the glass and push. By pressing the button, it would send an emergency signal to the surface. At the same time, it would turn on the canopy lights, making it as bright as day outside.

With no other ideas, Asaka gave a shout as she smashed the glass and pressed the button.

The Emergency Distress Signal has been activated. As the surface is unaware of your current condition, please use your judgment to act as the situation dictates.

Just as the recorded message informed them that help would be some time in coming, the gunfire outside became accompanied by the loud sound of

things being broken as bullets were fired into the mansion.

Asaka stood up, grabbing a pair of frying pans and handing one to Yogiri.

"Will this stop the bullets?"

"I saw this in a movie once," Asaka said. She doubted it would work, but figured it was better than doing nothing at all, since they had nothing else that could potentially stop a bullet.

Slowly, they made their way out into the hall. Light was pouring in through numerous holes in the walls, showing that it had turned bright outside just like the emergency recording had said.

"If you're there, come out!" a rough voice called to them. "You have ten seconds before we use the rocket launcher!"

"What should we do?" Yogiri asked.

"Well, let's go outside for now." She would wait to use Yogiri until the last possible moment. If they could talk things out, it was best to do so.

Making Nikori wait in the living room, Asaka and Yogiri stepped outside, using the frying pans to cover their faces.

In the front yard, men in black suits, armed to the teeth with a variety of weapons, were lined up facing them. They held guns ranging from pistols, shotguns, machine guns, and a rocket launcher to bladed weapons like swords and spears. They even had ritual clubs, prayer beads, and talismans that didn't look like weapons at all.

"Who exactly were they planning on fighting here?" Asaka murmured.

"Enju!" Yogiri called as he saw her standing among the men.

"Do it," one of the guards ordered. Apparently, they had no intention of talking anything out.

A number of the men aimed their weapons, but the moment they tried to pull the trigger, they fell dead to the ground.

"I can kill the ones that try to kill us, right?" Yogiri asked uneasily. He seemed worried that Asaka would get angry with him after having said she wanted to keep things peaceful.

"Yes, that's fine," she replied bluntly, resolving herself. There was no point in beating around the bush now. She turned back to the guards and shouted, "I'm sorry, please wait! Listen to me!" knowing full well it was probably pointless. "We've just killed those who tried to attack us. We have that kind of power, so please stop this!"

"So what?!"

The men in suits were quite resolved themselves. Unfazed by the mysterious deaths of their comrades, they moved to continue their attack. One by one, they raised their weapons, and subsequently collapsed.

Killing them all at once would have been easy for Yogiri, but out of consideration for Asaka's wish to avoid unnecessary harm, he targeted only those who tried to hurt them first.

After a while, silence suddenly fell. It was more than she could count at a glance, but most of the men were now dead. The only ones left were Enju and her three attendants.

At first, they didn't move. Asaka was trying to think of what to do next when the bodies all began to glow.

"Hey, that's not your power, right?" Asaka asked.

"No, I wonder what's going on," Yogiri replied, clearly as curious as she was.

The lights coming from the bodies were making an "X" above each of them.

"Damn. There's nothing we can do. We die the moment we try to attack..." Having figured out how it worked, Takaoka muttered in annoyance to himself as he raised a pistol at his companions.

"Stop!" Enju screamed, immediately recognizing his plan, but Takaoka didn't hesitate. Pulling the trigger, he shot one of the remaining bodyguards. A glowing "X" appeared above the man as he fell. Seeing that, Takaoka promptly shot the other, producing yet another "X."

"Why..."

"My lady, I'm sorry." As he spoke, he lifted the gun to his own head, pulling the trigger without delay.

"What on earth?" Asaka was absolutely dumbfounded.

"Takaoka!" Enju screamed, grabbing her bodyguard's lifeless body. Just like the others, a glowing "X" appeared above his corpse and she began to sob. "No...I'm sick of this...stop...stop it..."

As Asaka tried to figure out what to do, someone new appeared. A boy in a simple white robe strolled through the pile of bodies like they were nothing.

"Wow, what an amazing sense of self-sacrifice! Realizing he couldn't kill those two, he decided to wipe out his own side in hopes that the target was among them, huh? The loyalty he showed up to the end, to do something like that without hesitation, is most impressive. Three left now. Who do you think

is on the other team? Though really, don't you think trying to kill those two in the first place, when they had nothing to do with any of it, was a mistake?"

"Who are you?" Asaka asked, her confusion growing. There had been no one like this boy among the guests in the village.

"Ah, I guess you were kind of forced into this, so you never heard the rules. I'm the Judge, a program designed to determine whether humanity should be wiped out or not."

Asaka could only stare wordlessly at his declaration. The words made it sound like he was being intentionally nonsensical, but she couldn't overlook what he was saying. After all, she knew full well that destroying humanity was possible for someone like Yogiri.

"Enju was part of that judgment program, but she ran here to hide until the time was up instead of taking a stand. I didn't think that was fair, so I had the trial continue down here."

"So, what? You're the reason all this happened?"

"That's right. I just made a smaller-scale version of the conflict down here, to continue what we were doing up on the surface. Now, Enju. You're almost out of time. What will it be?"

At the boy's words, Enju pulled the gun from Takaoka's hands and pointed it at Yogiri and Asaka.

"Enju, stop it!" Yogiri shouted, on the verge of tears.

Enju wasn't like the men in suits. As far as Asaka knew, she was the first friend Yogiri had ever had. It was possible he wouldn't kill her even if she tried to shoot them. Realizing that, Asaka jumped in front of Yogiri to protect him.

Enju's hands trembled as she held the gun. It wasn't hard to believe she had never fired one before, and it didn't look like she'd be able to hit her target with the way she was shaking.

"No...no, no, no...Yogiri's my friend...I can't kill him..." she cried, breaking down into sobs again as she dropped the weapon.

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“I mean, that’s fine with me. But it means you’ll run out of time and humanity will be destroyed,” the Judge observed, clearly disappointed by her decision. “All right, maybe I’ll give you a hint, then. I didn’t even know those two were here in the first place. I was a bit confused when these guys all grabbed their weapons and ran outside.”

If that was true, it meant that Enju herself was the sole member of the “destroy” team. It really was a sick joke — from the start, there’d been no saving her.

Enju lifted the gun again. Seeing what she was about to do, Asaka leaped towards her. Enju’s words flashed in the back of her mind, and she remembered that touching her would mean her own death, but even that couldn’t slow her down. At least Enju was wearing gloves...they would probably keep her power at bay.

Asaka reached the girl’s side and pushed her over, hurriedly picking up the gun she had knocked from her hands. Jumping recklessly into action without any regard for the future was becoming her modus operandi.

“You!” she yelled at the Judge, enraged. “What the hell are you trying to do here?! What the hell kind of judgment is this?!”

“I honestly don’t care *how* the judgment is carried out, you know,” the boy said casually. “My intention was to destroy humanity from the start. I just thought I’d give you guys one last chance to change my mind. Of course it was going to be difficult.”

Yogiri stepped forward. “Hey. Give up on this judgment or whatever and go somewhere else.”

Asaka was surprised by his voice. At some point, he had walked up beside her. Though he spoke in a quiet, restrained tone, Asaka could hear a rare emotion lacing those words.

Yogiri was angry.

“Hm? And why should I do anything *you* tell me to?”

“Okay, then die.”

At Yogiri’s command, the Judge collapsed. The moment he did, something strange started to happen — countless black lines appeared in the air. The lines slowly widened, forming ovals above them. From each, a person with wings and a halo emerged, immediately striking fear into Asaka’s heart.

We are the executors. In accordance with the will of the Final Judgment

Program, we shall now begin the erasure of humanity, their words echoed from within her own head.

"All of you, die."

And with that, the beings calling themselves the executors fell to the ground, never to rise again.

◇ ◇ ◇

Shortly after the death of the executors, someone calling herself the Arbiter appeared, immediately throwing herself to her hands and knees before them. She must have thought she would die the moment she appeared.

Luckily for her, Yogiri wouldn't kill someone who was trying so hard to show they were harmless. Aside from the ordinary business suit she was wearing, the woman seemed fairly cordial. She must have chosen her physical form to dispel any sense of hostility.

"If you have something you want to talk about, can you do it with the research staff?" Asaka said, waving her off. The facility's emergency responders had finally made it down to respond to their distress call, so she passed it all on to them. Things like the destruction of humanity or some Final Judgment Program were above her pay grade.

After spacing out in the corner of the yard for some time, Head Researcher Shiraishi came up to her. "Well, seems things got pretty rough down here."

"How did it go?"

"We managed to come to an agreement. They've decided to repeal their decision to wipe out humanity, and they've agreed to erase Enju's power as well as those of the other Adjudicators."

"What were they, actually?"

"Disciples of the creator of humanity, or so they say."

"Are you serious?"

"I have no idea if they're telling the truth. That's just what they told us."

"If we're talking about the creator of humanity, that would make us like their children, right? Just because you're the parent doesn't mean you can kill your kids."

Regardless of whether this being was responsible for creating the world, thinking it had the right to decide whether they lived or died was just plain

arrogance.

“In exchange, they’ve asked Yogiri to stop killing them. Is that okay?” Shiraishi asked, turning to the boy. Normally, he referred to him as AΩ, but he was hesitant to use that code name in front of Yogiri himself.

“Yeah, I won’t kill them anymore.”

“What happened?”

“I’m not sure what you’d call it, but Heaven, I guess? Anyway, all of the executors waiting there died. When they saw that, they started to panic.”

“That still sounds bizarre...”

“I wouldn’t take their claims at face value either, but they are clearly some sort of supernatural life form.”

As their conversation came to an end, Asaka looked out across the yard. The bodies were all being removed, and repairs to the mansion were now underway.

“It really isn’t a good idea to let people come down here,” she said.

“But don’t you think humanity’s been saved only *because* they came down here?”

“Don’t you think if they tried to wipe out humanity for real, Yogiri would eventually get them anyway?”

“I guess we won’t know that until it happens. All right, I should get going.” With that, Shiraishi left them behind.

“Is Enju okay?” Yogiri murmured. After all that had happened, the girl had ended up passing out, so she had been taken to a hospital on the surface.

“She wasn’t injured, so I’m sure she’ll be fine,” Asaka replied lightly. Considering the day’s events, Enju’s mental health was a much greater concern, but there was no point in worrying him.

“Will she come back to play again?” His face showed a mixture of hope and anxiety.

“Maybe once she’s feeling better.” Asaka could only hope that such a thing would be possible.

Afterword

Thank you for purchasing this book! I'm quite thankful that I was able to release the third volume without issue, and thrilled to hear they've decided to do a second printing of volume 1! This is all thanks to your support. I will keep trying my best from here on out!

Now then, I've already begun running out of things to write about in these afterwords, so I'll start by continuing the topic from the afterword of volume 2: the plan to include the readers' ideas!

The winners present in this volume were:

Sora Akino
Seiichi Fukai
The Dunfer

This round was a selection from among eight entries. And one of those eight people, after reading the afterword, sent me a postcard. Thank you very much. I just thought I'd write that and see what happens, but I actually got my first fan letter. I am deeply, deeply grateful.

Once again, I've decided to include some readers' characters in the next volume, but this time I'm changing things up a little. Until now, I was looking for "small fry enemy" submissions, but this time I'm looking for normal characters. Part of the reason was that I thought many people would be hesitant to send in a character they knew was just going to die, but the main reason is that it would feel like a spoiler. The moment one of those characters appeared, they would realize, "Oh, this person is going to die."

Well, most enemies die instantly in this series anyway, so it's not a big deal, but it was still bothering me a bit, so I figured I'd set things straight. So now, there's no telling if the fan characters appearing after volume 3 will live or die!

So, allow me to outline the important points for submissions. Please include:

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The character's name.

If the character has some background, up to 140 characters describing it, and/or any pictures (since I'm accepting submissions through Twitter, that's the character limit).

Don't feel the need to write too much background information. Even just a name is enough. There is no real deadline, but I will be making the decision in time for the release of the next volume. I'm planning on using two or three names this time, but as always, that may change based on the needs of the story.

Please send your submissions to this address:

〒107-0052
Tokyo-to Minato-ku Akasaka 2-14-5 Daiwa Akasaka Building 5th Floor
Earth Star Novels Editorial Department, Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

Some more important details:

Inappropriate names, or those of characters from other works, will not be accepted.

Please create a character that seems like it might appear in this book. Anything that doesn't fit won't be accepted.

There is a possibility your character will die immediately, so please keep that in mind. "Dying without saying a word," "dying the moment they appear," and "dying without even meeting the protagonists" are all possibilities.

Next, I'll talk about what has changed from the web novel version:

Added interludes showing what happened to some of the characters we met in volume 2.

As usual, a new short story about Yogiri's past.

That's about it. There were also numerous corrections made for errors in the text, as always.

Also, if I may be allowed to advertise a bit, I've started a new work for the "Becoming an Author" program. It's called "Harumi, the Mimic with Beautiful Legs — The Legend of the Rise of a Unique Monster." It's a story

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about a treasure chest with legs, mowing down adventurers on her way to the top. Please take a look.

Finally, my thanks. To my director, I'm sorry for always leaving things until the last minute. To the illustrator, Chisato Naruse, thank you for your illustrations, which continue to get better and better. Thank you as well for the pictures you provided for the Twitter countdown for volume 2's release. Really, I can't thank you enough. The countdown pictures are all on Miss Naruse's Pixiv, so please go take a look. They are all wonderful.

So, about volume 4. After reading volume 3, you no doubt realized the story seemed to stop halfway, so I imagine you would be quite upset if volume 4 didn't come out. There should be no problem doing that much, but there are no guarantees we'll be able to continue after that, so I humbly ask for your continued support.

Let's meet again in volume 4!

Tsuyoshi Fujitaka
藤孝 剛志

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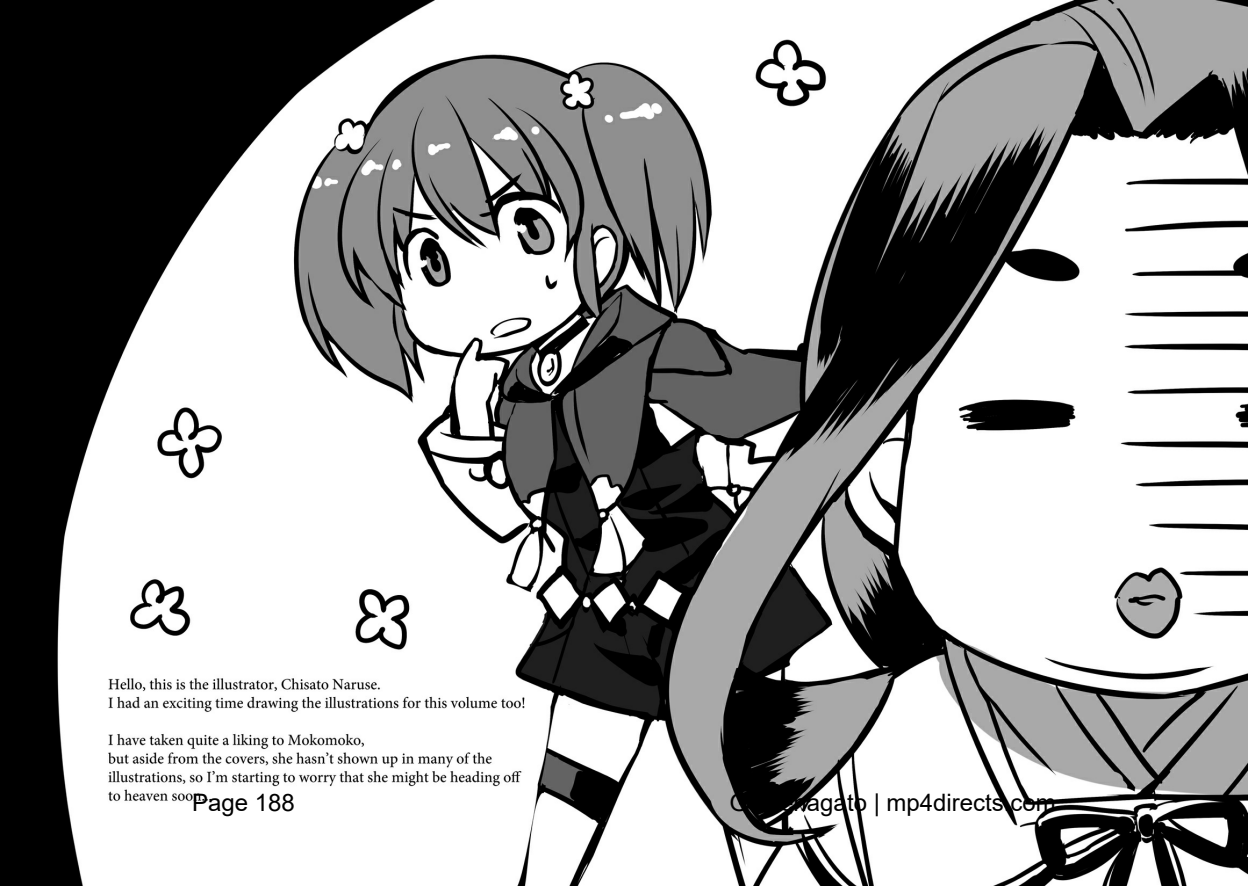

Hello, this is the illustrator, Chisato Naruse.
I had an exciting time drawing the illustrations for this volume too!

I have taken quite a liking to Mokomoko,
but aside from the covers, she hasn't shown up in many of the illustrations, so I'm starting to worry that she might be heading off to heaven soon.

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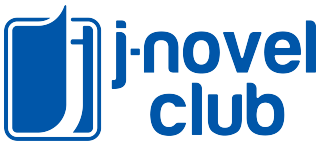

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My Instant Death Ability is So Overpowered, No One in This Other World Stands a Chance Against Me! Volume 3
by Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

Translated by Nathan Macklem
Edited by Tess Nanavati

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